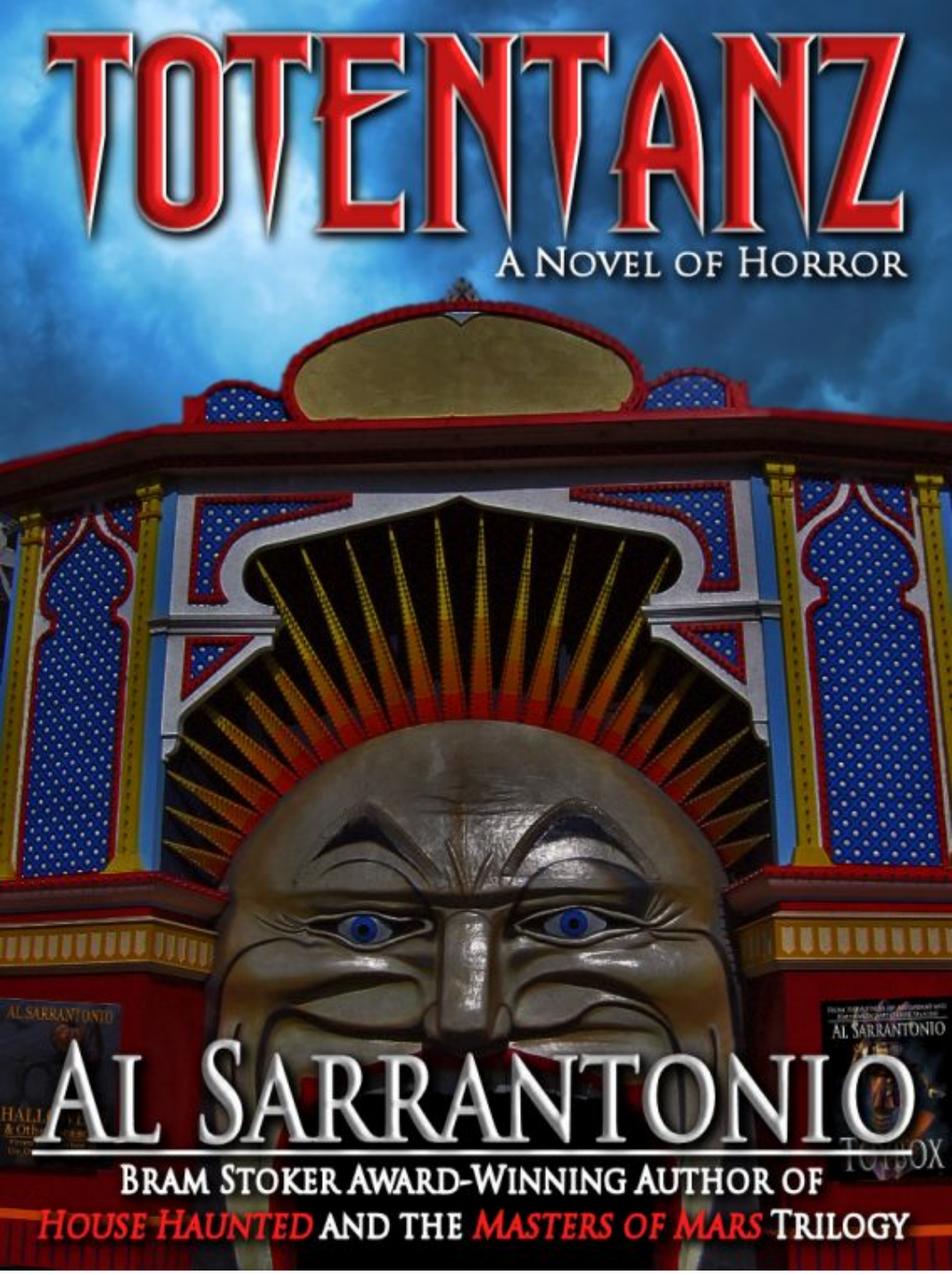
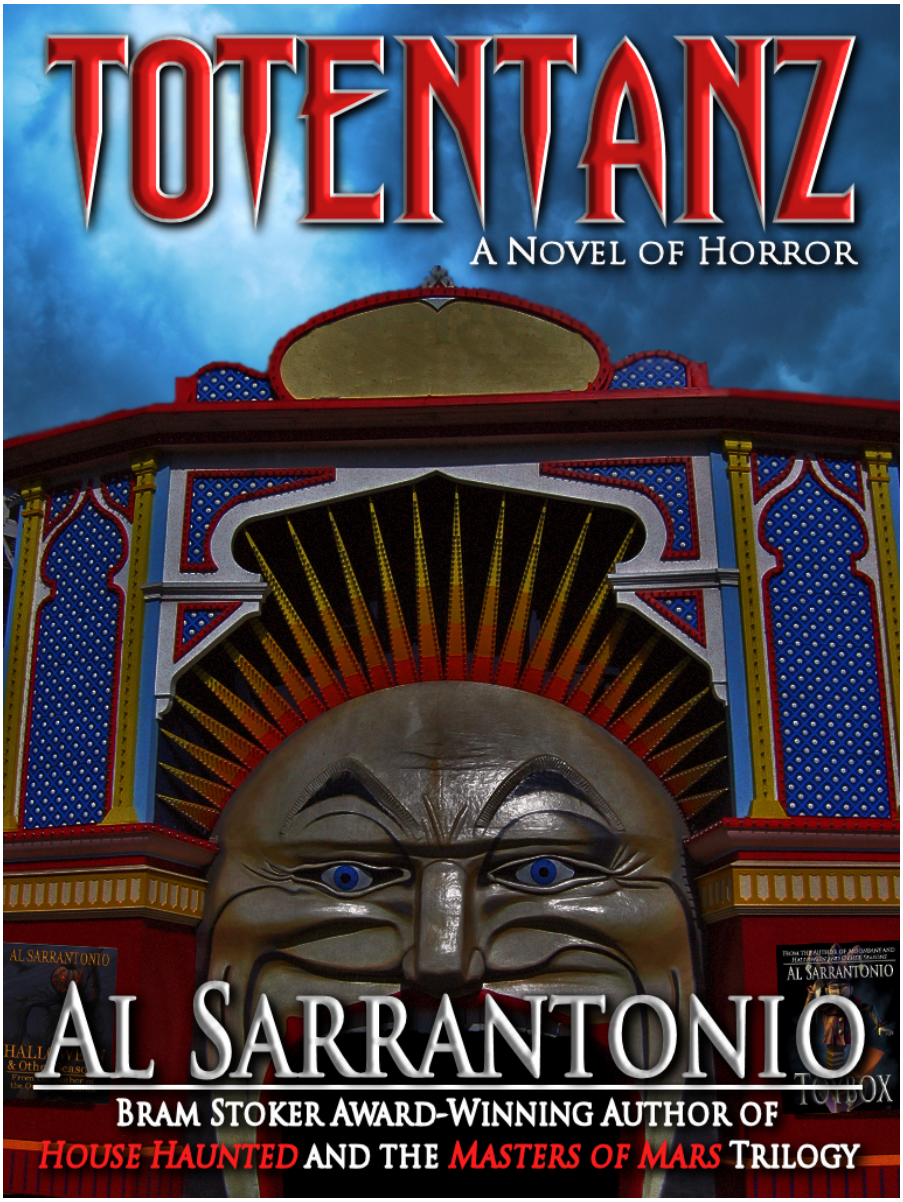
TOTENTANZ

A Novel of Horror



AL SARRANTONIO

Bram Stoker Award-Winning Author of
House Haunted and the *Masters of Mars* Trilogy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HOUSE HAUNTED AND THE MASTERS OF MARS TRILOGY

TOTENTANZ

By Al Sarrantonio

MACABRE INK

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If it be summer, he is easy to see, for he comes dressed in mourning, his breath smelling of retribution, asking only for a kiss. . . .

—Anonymous

ONE

There was ice in the summer night, but it was not in the trees or on the ground. It was not in the July air, hot and close around them, as sticky as dried vanilla ice cream. Their skin sweated because of the night, yet there was nothing but snow in their bones. Ice, long shivers of it, ran through them like clear cold blood.

"The box opened," Reggie Carson said in a fierce whisper, leaning forward, spreading his hands over his two friends like an Old Testament prophet, "and the thing sat straight up, its waxy face running flesh, its eyeballs popping out, and in its half-eaten hand it held . . . *the claw!*"

Reggie tossed something at them, a mass of twigs or pipe cleaners in the shape of a talon.

They jumped, and another wash of cool fright broke over them and then rolled back.

Heat lightning flashed suddenly overhead, illuminating the scene like a postcard: three boys on a hill in a churchyard. Around them, like bumps on a blanket, sat a thousand graves in neatly planted rows or older, jumbled clusters. Just behind the three boys, on the summit of their grave hill, stood a mystery vault, a squat, locked death box, its darkly mottled, stained-glass windows like eyes, its big rectangular door like an owl's hooting mouth. Another lightning flash, revealing those three boys: Jack and Pup, sitting down, knees drawn up, a scattering of candy wrappers and sandwich leavings around them, a knocked-over can of Coke and a half-full bottle of orange soda between them, their faces looking up expectantly at Reggie, who stood above them, dark face momentarily still.

"Tell us about the tomb again," Jack said. Long and lean, he stretched his legs out, pulling the creases out of his jeans. He sometimes said he wanted to be a Marine, like his father. Pup, with brighter, smaller eyes, was not quite fat but might someday be so: he reached for the fallen Coke can and cursed to find it nearly empty, its contents puddled on the ground.

"Yeah, tell us about that Jeff Scott guy, and why they never put him in the crypt," Pup added.

"This one's real," Reggie said, and for a moment disappointment crossed his friends' faces, as if his hinting that the other story had not been real was a kind of betrayal: as if to reinforce this, lightning shone once again. "Well, anyway, I know this one's for real because it's in the town history books. They call this the Tomb of the Unknown Man, not because they don't know who he is, but because they don't know what happened to him. It was built for a guy named Jeff Scott. I never found out what, but the town did something to him, and so in

nineteen twenty, a long time after he died, they built him this crypt, to say they were sorry, I guess. Only, when they went to dig up his old grave"—Reggie pointed downhill to a ragged group of tilted headstones around a huge oak tree, barely discernible in the night except when the lightning illuminated it"—they found that he wasn't in it. There was just a pile of churned-up dirt in the hole."

They had studied that grave site a hundred times, the earth now patted down, the stone reading "Jeff Scott, 1846-1865," had put their hands upon it, had tried to draw meaning and sustenance from it.

"What happened to him?" Pup asked. He knew the good part was coming. He swatted at a mosquito, trapping it on his palm and pinching it between his thumb and forefinger. He watched the blot of bright red that came from it and then wiped his hands on his pants.

Reggie's face grew serious. "Barney Bates told me he rose up by himself and left Montvale and that someday he's coming back." Slowly he looked around at the stone building behind him, then back at the other boys. "I don't know what that means, but Barney Bates says he's coming back not to sleep in this tomb, but for revenge."

A delicious chill crept over Jack and Pup, and they let it wrap around them for a few moments.

"Did you ever think there might be something locked in there anyway?" Pup asked finally, pointing to the vault. The feeling was fading, and he wanted to revive it. "Did you ever think that maybe it's not empty? I think there's a bucket of bats in there, or something worse. Maybe something that would come out and kill everyone in Montvale."

Jack said to Pup, laughing, "It'd have a tough time getting you. There's so much of you to get." A dark look passed over Pup's face.

"Sometimes," Reggie said dreamily, "I do think there's something in there, waiting for me." Cautiously they looked around at the windows, imagining something moving behind the stained glass.

"Jesus." Jack said, pointing to what looked like motion—but it was only the weak reflection of a cloud across the winking half-moon.

"Sometimes I really think there's something in there." Reggie repeated. His voice was low and serious. Jack and Pup looked at each other, and a smile passed between them because they knew what was coming. They knew Reggie was going into one of his real weird moods, one of his death moods, and nothing but a good thrill would come of it.

Reggie said. "I think there's something in there calling to me. I'd walk up there, the doors would swing open and it would reach out, whatever it is." The other two boys squirmed. Its touch would be warm, and then icy cold. Just a long blue vapory arm, trailing off into the darkness behind it. The fingers of the hands would tighten around

me and begin to pull me forward. I'd hear something inside, a scratching sound like nails down a blackboard, but I wouldn't be able to get away from the grip of the thing. It's reeling me into the darkness like I'm a fish.–

Reggie's face resembled a sleepwalker's, and his voice became a whisper. "Inside, the scratching sound stops. And there's dead silence. It smells like damp wood in there. At the door the hand stops, and then it pulls me inside. I hear the door close slowly, and I struggle but I can't loosen the grip the thing has on me. It's so wet and cold. I begin to shiver. I reach out to the door, trying to stop it from closing. But it clangs shut, and I'm in darkness."

Reggie's body was shaking as he spoke.

"And then," he went on, his voice rising, "and then something with claws *reaches out in the dark and grabs me!*"

With a scream of laughter, he pulled two more twig talons from his pockets and leaped at his two friends, bowling them over. They rolled on the ground together, squealing, three boys as one, and then they separated.

Reggie wiped tears of laughter from his eyes. But as he glanced back at the sepulcher, a darkness crossed his features again.

"You really had us going, man," Pup said.

Jack said, "I didn't believe it for a second." They looked at him gravely, and he broke into a grin.

"Well...."

Reggie and Pup leaped on him, and they rolled around again.

Another sheet of lightning glimmered off to the west, making the sky purple and gray. This time there was distant thunder, telling the boys that a different kind of lightning was here, rolling toward them with a possible storm. To reinforce this, a thin line of cloud moved across the moon, cutting its half into a quarter. Lightning sparked yet again, and the windows of the mausoleum winked, red and green and blue, and the doorway mouth said "Ooooo" at them before blinking out into darkness.

The three of them brooded.

"Hey, Reggie," Pup said, "tell us what it was like to die."

Instantly the air changed.

"Maybe I shouldn't have said that," Pup added, only half-sincerely, and Jack said, "Yeah, maybe you shouldn't have, jerk."

They regarded Reggie, whose eyes were on the ground.

"Not tonight, okay?" he said.

"You're not chicken, are you?" Pup asked impulsively.

"Hey, Pup!" Jack pushed him.

"Just kidding," Pup protested.

"If you want to get heavy," Jack said, "why don't you tell us about

the time you shot the Wiggins' cat?"

Pup grew quickly angry, his heavy face setting into blue blotches in the warm darkness. "I told you that was an accident, didn't I? Even if it wasn't, the fucking cat deserved it."

"Sure it was an accident?" Jack pursued.

"I said it was."

"Just kidding," Jack mimicked, backing off. He held his hands up for peace. "Really, just kidding."

A silence dropped among them. A mood they had carried with them for a long time had somehow fractured. For the first time, without their being able to put a finger on how or why, a crack was forming in their bond.

"Well, we're still the Three Musketeers, aren't we?" Jack urged, sensing the change and not wanting it.

"I guess so," Pup answered grudgingly, and then he smiled, holding out his fist. The other two held out their fists and they made the stack of three, the sacred handshake.

Another awkward silence engulfed them.

"Hey," Pup said, trying to sound nonchalant, "what do you guys think of Lavinia Crawford? You think she's a good-looker?"

"*Good-looker*?" Jack tried to sound sarcastic, but there was an uneasiness in his manner. They had never really talked, never really thought, about girls before. Not the three of them, the Three Musketeers.

Pup plunged ahead. "Pretty good-looking, don't you think?"

"You going to ask her out or something?" Jack inquired. The smirk on his face was artificial.

The embarrassment was tangible; it had driven out the tingling chill they had orchestrated among the gravestones and replaced it with this feeling of . . . well, not of what they were about.

No one spoke, and then Pup suddenly got to his feet. "Jesus Christ!" he said. "What is it with you guys? You going to stay like this forever? Don't you think there's anything else in the world except scaring the crap out of yourselves and building model airplanes?" His face was flushed, he was unsure of himself. "Don't you think there's anything else?"

"Like girls?" Jack smirked.

Pup turned on him. "Yeah, like girls. Don't you ever think about girls?"

Jack hesitated. "Sure . . .”

"And that's not only it," Pup continued, his confidence suddenly there. He turned toward Reggie, who had held his silence. "Who made Reggie boss? Why is he always the one that tells the stories, tells us what to do, sets up all the plans?” He turned on Jack again. "You're

the jerk who wants to be a Marine when you get older. Who made Reggie God?"

Jack answered, shrugging, "We've always done things this way."

"Don't you think maybe we could take turns or something?" Pup turned on Reggie directly. "Hell, I *am* fourteen, a year older than you guys."

"Sure, if you want," Reggie said.

"Is that all you've got to say?" Pup was pacing around. "What about you, Marine? Don't you ever want to *do* anything?"

"Like what?" Jack said.

"I don't know, like. . ." Pup faltered, his emotions getting ahead of his mind. There was obvious rage building within him. He stopped and faced Reggie again, pointing an accusatory finger at him.

"Why won't you ever talk about that time you almost died?" he shouted. "What's the big deal? You carry it around like a crown—like it's something you don't want anybody else to know about."

"Pup!" Jack warned, putting a hand on Pup's shoulder.

Pup pushed the hand away. "Let me finish! Just because your old man was a hotshot in Vietnam doesn't make you the leader, either." He looked at Reggie. "It's like you're some kind of big shot, or martyr. You tell us how much you like all this scary stuff, but you've been there—you saw what it was like. You died and then came back. And you won't even tell us—"

He caught himself in the middle of his tirade and said nothing more.

Quietly, Reggie said, "I don't talk about it because it bothers me."

Pup's head was down; Jack put his hand on Pup's shoulder again, and this time Pup let it stay.

"I'm sorry, Reg," Pup said after a moment. He sat down on the grass and crossed his legs. "I shouldn't have let my temper blow off like that."

"It's okay," Reggie replied. He bent down and suddenly jabbed Pup in the ribs, clumsily. "I bet Lavinia Crawford doesn't like guys with bad tempers, so you'd better watch it."

"Yeah," Pup began, and then he rose to his feet as a glare of headlights blinded them. "Oh, shit," he said. "It's Poundridge."

The mayor's long black Chevy pulled up the rise in front of them. It stopped next to the white picket gate leading into the churchyard. The bright beams of the headlights stabbed at the boys, pinning them like bugs against a board.

One long black door opened out. With a light grunt, a thin figure climbed out and made its way toward them. It stopped, said "Damn," and walked back to slam the car door shut. Then he was walking in front of the headlights, advancing slowly and wagging a finger.

"What in heck are you boys doing up here this time of night?" The voice was not altogether harsh, though it did hold a mildly accusatory tone. "Not doing mischief, are you?"

"Just sitting and talking, sir," Reggie said.

"That the Carson boy there?" Poundridge inquired, stopping before them. The headlights behind him made his body seem gaunter than it was. Vaguely, behind the windshield of the car, they could see his small wife Emma.

"Talking in a graveyard? Sounds a bit strange to me."

Arrogantly Pup said, "It's the truth. You don't want to call us liars and mess with my father about it, do you?"

Poundridge turned his bird's eyes on Pup. "I wonder what your father would do if he knew you had sneaked out to sit in a cemetery all night, eh?"

"Not a damn thing," Pup shot back.

"That'll be enough of that bad talk, Pup Malamut," Poundridge said.

There was a sound from the car, and Emma Poundridge's voice came crystal clear. "Leave those boys alone, Jonathan. It's summer, and they're not hurting anybody. Probably just telling ghost stories or something of the sort—that right, boys?"

Jack nodded.

Emma Poundridge said, "There, you see, Jonathan? Pup, Reggie, Jack, why don't you head on home now? Getting late and there's a storm coming." Her voice was firm and gentle at the same time, and she turned it on her husband. "You come back here and leave them alone. Anyway, that television show of yours will be on soon."

"Well," Poundridge said, scratching his chin, "that's true enough. You boys head on home." He turned to go.

"Mayor Poundridge?" Jack asked suddenly. "Do you know anything about that vault back there?"

There was another crack of lightning, followed by a snap of thunder and the first sharp, hot raindrops of the arriving storm. Poundridge looked at the small, square building. Again he scratched his chin, assuming his speech-making manner.

"Only what my father told me, and that wasn't much. I got the feeling that his father told him more. Seems it was built for a fellow named Jeff Scott, a Civil War veteran, but they never put him in it. His family owned all that land out behind Barney Bates' place. Farmed it, but my father said this Jeff Scott's father built a carousel on the property for all the Montvale kids to use." Poundridge bent down, and a conspiratorial light came into his small eyes. "If you boys can keep a secret, I don't mind telling you there's a brand-new carousel coming to that property—along with all sorts of other things."

"An amusement park?" Pup asked excitedly. "Here?"

The mayor straightened. "Any day now. Signed the papers last week. Looks like we'll finally be able to do something with that land—been fallow a long time. Maybe that'll keep you boys out of graveyards, eh?"

"Jonathan, come on now, it's getting late!" Emma called.

The mayor waved a hand at her and then held it out to feel for rain. "Stopped already. Looks like that storm's going to miss us after all. You boys go on home now." He walked back to the car, stopping halfway. "And tell your folks I'll be making a speech at the opening of that amusement park!"

The car door opened and closed.

The Chevy backed down the hill, away from the fence, turned and moved slowly off. The boys saw Mrs. Poundridge's face looking back at them to make sure they left.

"Guess we should go," Jack said, gathering up the candy wrappers and empty cans they had scattered.

"We could circle around and come back," Pup said halfheartedly.

"I'm tired anyway," Reggie said. He was staring at the crypt. "I've had enough for tonight."

Lightning winked high among the clouds, but there was no thunder. The storm had slipped by. The vault stared at Reggie in the flash, disappeared, stared at him again. Disappeared. Reggie's gaze stayed on it in the darkness. He could almost see those swirling, vaporous hands at the windows, reaching out for him. . . .

"Come on, Reg!"

He turned and blinked out of his daze. Jack and Pup were staring at him, their hands filled with empty soda cans, bottles and candy wrappers. Down the hill below them, Emma Poundridge's small white face regarded them through the car window.

"Reg, come on!" Jack said.

"I'm coming."

He felt the thinnest of touches on his shoulder, the caress of misty fingers. He knew that if he turned, the hands would be there, guiding him, and that the door would be open. Those hands would take him, caress him, pull him toward the doorway and then into the darkness

For a moment the gentle grip on his shoulder tightened. He almost let it turn him around. But then he took a step forward, following his friends down the hill, and the hands fell away into nothingness.

Two

They say that if you die in your dream, you die for real.

Reggie knew he was in the dream. He always knew. And in the middle of this dream, he thought of another dream he had once had that had let him know he was in it. He was in a long foxhole that wound away to the horizon in both directions. He had a dark-olive uniform on; there were soldiers all around him. It was very quiet, just before dawn, and a pale, orange glow was spreading on the eastern horizon. He could hear the shallow breathing of the men to either side of him. His heart was pounding. He looked over the lip of the foxhole and saw nothing but a long dirt runway. There were pockmarks and a few clumps of close-cropped brush that stood out like crew cuts in the grayish light. Out beyond, at about a hundred yards' distance, there was another long ditch. They all knew what was in there—and they all knew it was going to rise up and attack them at any time. Reggie held a rifle, his hands clammy on the wooden stock. He reached up to the barrel. The metal was cool and damp. The man to his right held a bazooka.

They waited.

The round edge of the sun rose, and in its shadow they saw the thing rise. Its long cylindrical body, almost too burdensome in Earth's gravity, was slowly hauled out of the ditch by tentacles that reached and curled tens of yards in every direction. As it advanced, it yowled like a cat in heat—a long, ponderous, terrifying sound.

"Hold your fire!" someone said close by. Someone else began to whimper. The thing half-crawled, half-rolled toward them, and suddenly someone broke, crying out and climbing backward out of the ditch and making a run for it. An officer scrambled out to block his way and hit the man square in the face. The man went down. "Nowhere to run to, soldier," the sergeant said and carried the man back to the ditch and threw him in.

"Hold your fire!" the captain said again, and this time he could not hide the tremor in his voice. The creature was fifty yards from them, sliding over the ground, throwing up great clumps of mud and dirt in its wake and twirling its tentacles in the air.

Thirty yards. Abruptly it rolled toward them, tucking in its long arms and turning over three or four times, closing the gap to ten yards. They could see the great oily mass of its body. The sun looked like a huge orange wart on its back.

"Hold," the captain repeated, his voice not believing what it was saying. Suddenly the knot in Reggie's stomach loosened and he stood up in the ditch, directly in the path of the thing that bore down on them.

"Don't worry!" he shouted, holding his hands up for attention. "This is only a dream! Nothing can happen to you. This is only a dream!"

And then the thing rolled straight at him, and he screamed, and he had suddenly awakened.

They say that if you die in your dream, you die for real.

Here, in this dream, he heard his mother say goodbye. Her voice was muffled, as from far away, and then he heard the front door slam, and the screen door behind it.

When he tried to get out of bed, the sheet pressed him down. He fought against it. It was as if the cloth was a sheet of metal held down by weights, but finally he threw it off. It clanged to the floor behind him as he rushed to the window.

The door of the red car was just slamming shut. He tried to open the window, but it would not lift. He pounded on it and shouted while the engine gunned into life and the car slid backward out of the driveway. Try as he might, he could not move the window.

The scene blurred and shifted. He held a sneaker in his hand, fumbling with the laces, and then suddenly it was on his foot. Somehow, he was outside now. His feet were pumping up and down, up and down, as if he were running. He looked down and saw that he was on a bicycle. It was his own bike, he knew. But it was trying to throw him as if it were a bucking horse. He held the handle grips tight: the back wheel kept bouncing into the air. "Whoa, boy," he said, and abruptly the bicycle was still. He looked up and saw his house receding behind him.

The bike made a turn, and he was on Independence Street, heading toward Main. He was picking up speed. It was early morning; the air smelled like fresh coffee and wet grass. The bicycle moved like the wind. When he lifted his feet from the pedals, the pedals kept turning. He put his feet back, on them and they turned even faster, making his feet and legs ache.

The bike banked sharply, making the air rush by his head, and he was on Main Street. Up ahead he could make out shops: a gas station, the newspaper store, a doughnut shop. In front of the doughnut shop, parked at a careless angle, was a red-and-white car with round red lights at the back and worn blackwalls. There was a dent from a parking accident on the driver's side. He knew for sure that it was the right car.

"Dad!" he called out, but his voice seemed swallowed by the wind as the bike hurtled along. He saw the glass door to the doughnut shop open and his father walk out. There was a paper under his arm. "Dad!" Reggie called again, but his father did not hear him; instead, he walked to the dented car door and put his hand on the handle to open

it.

Reggie called out once more, and now his father turned. Reggie saw that it was not his voice that had made him turn, but another sound. The bicycle swerved into the left lane in front of the doughnut shop. There was the desperate sound of hard-hit brakes. Reggie looked up to see, looming over him, the square white front of a milk truck. The driver's mouth was open, his body arched back as his foot jammed on the brake pedal. Reggie saw each tiny detail on the front of the truck: the yellow inspection sticker in the corner of the window, the long tarnished grill, the oval headlights—

The headlights went away. The morning, his father, the red-and-white car, the doughnut shop, the milk truck—everything went away. It was as if some gigantic unseen hands had painted them on a rubber canvas and then pulled the canvas to one side. In their place, behind the canvas, was only whiteness.

This happened. I'm dying, Reggie thought. He knew it was a dream; he knew he could stand up and say, "Don't worry, this is only a dream!" but he knew that this time it would make no difference. It was a dream, but it was really happening. *If you die in your dream, you die for real.* He knew that he was reliving it again, and he knew that if they did not get to him this time, didn't pull him back—

The world was made of rubber and was being pulled aside, and behind it, behind the world, there was nothing but whiteness. Above it there was a round, black canopy. The canopy dropped toward him, curving down over him, forming a tunnel. He had a last glimpse of his father, pulling off overhead, behind the forming tunnel, his face and body thin-stretched rubber. Reggie tried to say good-bye; all he wanted to do was to say good-bye. But he could say nothing, he could only watch. His father's face was shouting something, his long rubber arms reaching, but then he was gone. The whiteness was gone then too, and Reggie was in the dark tunnel, and alone.

There was a whooshing sound around him. The tunnel was like an air shaft. He stabilized, coming erect, and the tunnel was solid now. There was silence. He turned to look behind him, his body floating like the pictures he'd seen of astronauts in free fall. He was able to turn with ease. Behind him the tunnel stretched cavernously; at its end there was a dim gray light. Someone was standing in the light, but Reggie could not make out who it was. The figure was too far away, and too small.

He turned round again and saw that the other end of the tunnel was closer. There was a bright light at this end, and he was slowly drifting toward it. The light was almost blinding. It reached out and bathed him; although it was bright, it did not hurt his eyes but, rather, soothed them. Something marred the brightness of the light at its

center, and now, as he drifted closer, he saw that there was a figure standing here, too. The light surrounded it completely. Reggie shielded his eyes, but he could not see who the figure was. It stood there silently, and Reggie could feel the weight of its vision on him. He drifted nearer. He could see nothing of its body, but now two eyes in its face, two enormous eyes, became apparent. They were as big as small plates, and they were snaring Reggie like a docking ship. He was becoming lost in those huge orbs, in the bright, beautiful light around them. He felt himself flowing into them, becoming part of them

There was a cold breath behind Reggie's ear. Sudden fear bolted through him. He turned to see that the other end of the tunnel had collapsed toward him. The gray light was right behind him and something filled it, something huge and dark, bending down over him, opening its mouth, beginning to speak

I'm dying!

Reggie tried to scream. The enormous eyes were still there in front of him, but they made no move to help him. Why didn't they save him from this dark, cold thing'? Time was suspended. He knew that if another tick of the clock passed, the dark shape looming over him would speak its words. He was tottering on a ledge, and he would fall over it. Why couldn't the eyes help him?

If you die in your dream, you die for real.

He felt the tick of time. The dark mouth began to speak: "K—"

There was a blankness, and then hands were on him, human hands, and he looked up to see the tunnel peeling back, disintegrating around him. The dark shape disappeared, the eyes faded away, but he felt that something, something he couldn't remember, had passed between them and through him—some bond of that ticking moment of time that had begun—and then they were gone and the white-rubber canvas was there, wrapping down around him as the hands pulled him up, and he cried out.

He was on his stomach in his bed, his hands clutching the sides of the mattress. For a moment he could not move. The dream had come again—the dream that repeated what had really happened to him. And once again he had almost come too close to return. Once again that tick of time had almost lengthened to eternity.

From the brink of death, they had said. Reggie knew it was true. Those eyes and that light and the tunnel had been *real*, and then he had been yanked back. He had been dead, and then he had been alive again. He had been there on the very edge, on the lip of some other place; the eyes had been drawing him into it, and then the doctors had reached into the tunnel and put their cold gloved hands on him and pulled him back. Each time the dream repeated exactly what had happened, and each time he came to the very moment of knowing

who and what.

They say that if you die in your dream—

But he always came back.

He turned over slowly and sat up. The front of his pajamas was soaked in chilled sweat. He sat still for a moment, head down and eyes closed. *What was there? What happened when you fell over that ledge?* The fear of that huge dark shadow and the warmth of those enormous eyes haunted him.

What was beyond that moment of time?

His mother eased the door open and stuck her head into the room. "Reggie?" she called sleepily. "You okay?"

He opened his eyes and looked at her, and she came into the room and sat down on the bed. "Reggie, are you ever going to stop having that dream?" she asked softly.

"I don't know, Mom."

His mother was silent. Reggie studied her face: almost old at thirty-nine, the creamy black features beginning to wrinkle slightly, the soft brown eyes beginning to tire just a bit. His mother was a beautiful woman.

"Reggie," she began, and then hesitated, slapping one hand on the other in frustration. "Reggie, it's been six years. Don't you think it's time to forget?" Again she slapped her hand, and her voice became almost angry. "You're thirteen years old."

She rose, walked a few steps and then turned. "All these *things* you've got. All these things that have to do with death." She pointed to a poster over Reggie's bed, a faded reproduction of Breughel's "The Triumph of Death," and waved a hand at the death totems scattered around the room: monster heads that glowed in the dark; a grinning-skull mask made of rubber, hanging on one post of the bed; rows of wax fangs and claws on the bookshelves; a plastic model of a working guillotine, its basket containing a small, chopped-off head that looked up with a startled, open-mouthed expression, the eyes wide. The only other object in the room was a framed photograph of a handsome young man in a uniform, smiling. "And the rest of it—all over the house. The horror-movie cassettes, the handmade mummy in the cellar, the rubber spiders and bats hanging in the bathroom. Skulls everywhere—not to mention all the other things you have in that clubhouse you keep with your friends. Don't you think you've gone far enough with this stuff?"

"It's just what I'm interested in," he said slowly.

"I worry about you," his mother said, coming to the bed and pulling him to her. "I really do worry."

"There's nothing to worry about," Reggie said. "It's . . . just something I'm interested in."

She held him closer. "If I ever lost you, I don't know what I'd do. I just don't know."

She began to tremble, and then she was sobbing. Reggie didn't know what to say. "Nothing's going to happen to me, Mom," he muttered.

She finally let him go and wiped her eyes. For a moment there was silence, and when she spoke, her voice was low.

"Reggie, I'm going to tell you something I've never told you before. I was with you in the hospital, holding your hand, when you went away. I *felt* you leave. Right at that moment, I felt it. Your hand was warm, and then it got so cold for a second that I thought I was imagining it. That's when the doctors started to yell. They pushed me out of the way. One of them said, `He's gone,' but I already knew you were dead." She paused, and then went on with difficulty. “At that moment I promised that if you came back, I'd give up anything in the world." She looked deep into his eyes. "Anything, Reggie. And you came back. They brought you back. And then . . . . Her eyes filled with tears; she covered her face with her hands. "And then when your father died in Lebanon, when he never came home again, I felt so guilty." She was unable to go on for a moment. "I loved your father so much. But I promised to give up anything!"

"Mom."

She held him again, and quickly composed herself.

"I just don't want to ever lose you," she said. "I don't want anything bad to ever happen to you."

"I know, Mom."

She hugged him and then let him go, easing him back against his pillow. "You sleep well now," she said, straightening up. "No more dreams, okay?"

She left, turning the silent switch to darken the room again. Reggie stared at the closed door. He thought about her and his father together, remembering fragments: the three of them at a pond feeding the ducks, the ripples of the warm water lapping toward them; a Christmas tree, his father laughing as it lay in the stand at a crooked angle, his mother coming into the room and her eyes lighting up like the Christmas lights; his father mowing the lawn, stopping as Reggie went by, letting the lawnmower idle while he picked Reggie up, throwing him high into the air and catching him tight as he fell. "Sky boy!" he shouted, tossing him up again. And he remembered one more thing: a birthday. He remembered hearing his father in the garage below his bedroom the night before. The July heat had bathed him as he lay comfortably in bed listening to his father labor away at the bicycle he had asked for, singing while he put it together, the bicycle he had found in the garage, complete, early the next morning as his

father was called away to his base to leave for Lebanon, even before he had eaten breakfast, the bicycle Reggie had tried to catch up with him on, seeing the car where his father had stopped to grab a cup of coffee, only wanting to say thanks and good-bye, and then the milk truck—

He turned over in bed, knelt by the headboard, and switched on the reading light to study the poster of "The Triumph of Death." It was a huge canvas, a vast panorama with a thousand bony skeletons and screaming bodies. There was nowhere those people could run; the skeletons formed phalanxes and patrols and were hunting them down. Only one figure in the entire picture seemed to be resisting: A foot soldier in the lower right-hand corner was drawing his sword against the advancing bone men. Reggie's gaze roamed over the field of bodies. *Is this what death is?* To him it had been a shocked thud, blackness, and the mystery of the tunnel.

What was over that ledge?

He was growing tired. His lids began to get heavy. For a moment the poster became like that white elastic canvas he had seen after the truck hit him. And there, superimposed on it, was another vision: all of Montvale turned into a vast landscape of death. Across it strode a tall figure, a man and yet not a man, his face so white as to be no color at all, his tall, sharp frame moving like a sickle through the world. His eyes were the absence of eyes, his mouth a cruel, thin, red slit, his black suit a form of nothingness. He looked to the left and right, and then his eyes turned to Reggie with horrible power—and suddenly Reggie was in the poster, in the lower right-hand corner, the lone soldier drawing a weak blade made merely of metal. . . .

Reggie blinked awake. His hands were resting on the headboard, his body hunched up in a half-kneel. The poster over the bed was the same as always. Slowly, almost too tired to move, he slipped down and turned over, sliding under the covers. The bed was warm. He tried to open his eyes, to stare at the ceiling, to think. His lids closed.

He dreamed again that he heard his mother say good-bye. . . .

THREE

In another place, someone else dreamed.

It wasn't dreaming, exactly. He did not close his eyes because when he did, there was nothing but silence. When he closed his eyes he went away somewhere, and when he opened them he came back to this place. He never remembered what happened in between.

His dreams were of another kind. He lay with his hands behind his head, one foot braced on the side of the bunk and the other on the wall of the truck, and he let his memories wash over him. This was as close to dreaming as he came.

He was housed in blackness. The back of the truck was closed off, the dull metal doors shut and the two cut-out windows shuttered with black tape. He had done the taping himself. When the truck stopped, he did not get up to relieve himself or to eat or to stretch his legs. Occasionally he was jostled as the truck ran over a pothole, but he merely set himself back on the bunk and continued to dream.

There were other trucks, in front and in back, and the noises of these only added to the roar, but he heard none of this. There had been a time when trucks had amazed him, when electric lights and gasoline and telephones and phonographs had amazed him, but this time had long passed. Once you got past the fact that these things existed, everything else was the same. People, he had found, were always the same.

He closed his eyes, but sleep, or what happened to him that was like sleep, would not come. The truck took a long curve, and he felt the weight of his body shift with the pull of it. Darkness eluded him. Finally something of the blackness descended; then the truck stopped abruptly, started up again and almost immediately bounced into a rut. This tossed him enough to one side that he had to reposition himself on the stiff bunk.

Giving up, he lay back with his eyes open and dreamed.

He was on a train. Someone was tapping him, pushing at his shoulder to wake him up. He swam out of his sleep to see an earnest face under a blue cap, bending over him. For a moment he thought it was an officer, but then he saw that the man's cap was of a different shade of blue and that the man's face was florid and full and not wartime slack at all. The man had a short mustache and looked at him urgently. "Your stop, soldier," the conductor said, nudging him a final time to make sure he was awake. "Your stop next."

He sat up all the way, pushing his boots against the seat in front of him as the conductor straightened and moved on, announcing the station in the failed stage basso he knew that all conductors of all times used.

He looked out the window, ignoring the insistent ache in his leg where his wound had been pressed tight against the seat. He saw that, indeed, they were coming slowly into town. The sun was low, and it must be either sunset or sunrise, and he wasn't sure which and didn't much care. He felt wearier than he ever had before. He was a young man with a young face and curly reddish hair, and he had never been quite old enough to grow a mustache. His hands were large and his eyes were large and almost blue, and his mouth had never been the smiling kind, although he knew how to smile. He had smiled a long time ago, but he had not smiled since.

With a sudden instinct, he wheeled up and out of his seat, pulled his duffel from the overhead rack and moved with clacking steps to the end of the car and down onto the exit platform. The train was losing speed and he stood half-in, half-out for a moment, feeling a stiff, artificial breeze across his face before letting go of the safety rail to jump onto the steep grade of the tracks. He landed on his feet, and then his right leg gave out suddenly, sending him down into a roll, but he came up into a sitting position unhurt, brushing the dust from his war-worn pants and coat. He got to his feet, knocking his hat against his leg and watching the train move off into the approaching station and then, for all he knew, into infinity.

It was only after the train had made its short stop, almost immediately grinding into motion once more, that he turned his attention to the farm in the near distance.

As his eyes studied it, an ache began deep within him, an ache that needed no encouragement and that he couldn't stop even if he had wanted to. In a way, he savored it. It was many aches in one: an ache for lost childhood; for the life that this farm—if not prosperous, at least life-serving—had once meant to him; an ache for the loss of his brother Tom; and above all, an ache of dull anticipation about what he would find here. He expected the worst. When the last few letters he had sent from the army hospital had gone unanswered, the last one even being returned, he knew that something had occurred, but he refused to admit that he knew until he had seen it with his own eyes. His father had always been a strong man, but there had been those times when he had been taken with that strange pain in his joints and been forced to go to his bed. Perhaps that had happened—but then, why hadn't he at least heard from Lucius? Lucius could read and write as well as any white man in Montvale, and for all intents and purposes, he was a member of the family. Over the years, Lucius had become almost an uncle.

Now that he approached the farm, he saw that it looked abandoned. The whitewash was peeling from the fences and the front of the house; the big oak out front was dead—it looked as though it

had been hit by lightning. No sign of animals or equipment anywhere. And there, to the side of the barn, stood the small carousel his father had built with his own hands after seeing a picture of a European carousel in a penny magazine; now it was stripped and skeletal, the hand-carved horses and seats gone, the shell tilted to the ground off its axis.

Wearily, his boots heavy on the groaning boards of the steps, he entered the house. The inside was, if anything, worse than the outside. The stove and furniture were gone, prey to poachers. All that was left in his own room was a thin shelf hanging over his rusting bed, his old Bible on it, half-torn. Even the bed was only half there, the head and one side canting precariously on the dirty floor.

He made his way back out to the yard. The sun was sinking boldly now, a sharp ball of orange dropping in the west behind the low hills. With a grunt, he adjusted his meager pack and tramped across to the barn.

It was empty and damp, and he knew that it would have to be pulled down and replaced if he hoped to make a new start here. He didn't know if he wanted to do that. With a sigh, he turned to leave when a sound from a far corner caught his attention.

He called out in a loud, stern voice, "Someone there?"

Reflexively his hand went to his rifle, but he gradually lowered it.

"I said, anyone there?"

In the failing light he saw nothing in the rear of the barn: a few overturned crates and a stack of yellowed newspapers. Nothing to make a noise. He was about to dismiss the sound when a sudden memory came to him. Cautiously he made his way to the back of the barn, overturning the crates and moving the newspapers aside. After clearing away a thick mat of dust, straw and dirt, he uncovered a wooden door set evenly in the floor. With the tip of his rifle he hooked the metal ring and slowly raised the trap.

He shouted down into the darkness: "Come on up."

There was silence. Tiny fingers of fear began to climb his back because he *knew* there was someone down there in that dark hole. Then suddenly a face filled the opening, and a voice was calling his name in disbelief.

"My God, is that you? They told me you was killed in Gettysburg with your brother."

``Lucius!"

He dropped the rifle and helped the black man from the hole.

Lucius looked half-dead. There were circles under his eyes, his always-thin frame was shrunken to painful leanness, dark skin hung on tired bones. His hair had turned white, and he had the unsleeping look of a hunted man.

"Thank God for that hole, that old railroad hole, or I would have been hung six weeks ago."

"Where's your wife and boy?"

"They're safe, over in Potterville with the Carsons, my wife's family," Lucius said, lowering his frail body to the ground. "I sent them there after your daddy was murdered."

"Murdered!"

"Shot like a dog nearly two months ago. I'm almost sure it was one of them Major boys. They had a big bonfire and drew lots one night. Your daddy held out a long time. They wanted this land bad, figured the town would expand like mad with the war ended, and when he heard that both you and Tom was dead, he nearly gave up and gave it to them. But he held out until they shot him dead."

"What were you doing in the hole like that'?"

"Couldn't get away. Stayed to take care of your daddy's burial and then Petey Graham, that slow boy, he come running out to tell me they've decided to hang me, made up some story about me putting my hands on a little white girl. What they really know is I saw your daddy killed." He dropped his head. "The town's turned bad."

Seeing the hard look that had come into the other's eyes, Lucius grabbed him by the arm, holding strong.

"Don't you think about that! It's all of them. The whole town. They want this land, and it'd be best if you just left. Let them have it. There's nothing any of us can do about it now."

"I want you to leave here."

Lucius' eyes were pleading. "Please, don't do anything! They'll kill you!"

"Can you get to your wife?"

Some of the fight went out of the old man. "They looking for me everywhere."

"I want you to try to get away."

"Let me come with you," Lucius said abruptly, raising himself painfully to a standing position.

"No. Get to the next county and tell the sheriff what's happened here."

"Please don't do this," Lucius said. When there was no answer, Lucius took his arm. "Listen to me," he said sternly. "When you was a boy, I watched you, and I knew that behind the quiet there was a rage in you. You'd play with your brother, and he'd take something from you and laugh, and a fire would burn in you. But you never let it out. Now I fear you letting it out. Once you give in to hate, you can't come back. Your own father taught me that, when he saw what was building inside me 'cause of the way white people treat black people."

There was still no response, and now Lucius took him by both

shoulders, staring straight into his eyes. "You listen to me. While I was down in this hole, hiding like a dog, I had dreams. I dreamed terrible things, worse even than your daddy dying. I seen you come back from the war with the same hate in your eyes I see now, and then I seen all Montvale go up in flames."

A faint smile touched the other's lips. "You were always dreaming, Lucius." The smile drifted away. "Dreams don't mean anything."

"Listen to me! In my dreams I seen a boy, a black boy, and only he could save you. I seen him walking through the flames."

Seeing that he was unmoved, Lucius let go of him. "If dreams mean nothing, then save yourself. First you got to fight your hate, though."

The returned soldier took in the desolation around him. He thought of the long, slow pain that had come to settle in his heart and now could never be moved out—the pain that not Lucius, not anyone, could remove, that was even at this moment turning from a soft thing to something rock-hard. His eyes settled on the ruined carousel, one edge visible through the barn door. An old red-and-white banner hung in limp shreds from an overhead railing.

He touched Lucius' shoulder without looking at him and then turned away.

"Good-bye," he said.

By the time he had made his slow way into the middle of Main Street, the whole town of Montvale knew that he was back from the war. People hid. He was not supposed to have come back from the war; he was dead they had been told, and all the damage had long since been done. But here he was, and no ghost. Ghosts didn't wear dust and worn boots; ghosts didn't have dull blue-gray eyes that had seen too much too soon. Ghosts didn't let their swords tarnish and their rifle barrels clog with mud, and rust with rainwater, or their knapsacks fall open, spilling provisions all the way down the road into town. Those were not ghost provisions that trailed like peas, waiting to be picked up later by boys and girls out of school: a tin plate for one, a can of old beans for another, a spoon and fork, attached by a button at the handle, for a third. Ghosts didn't make real tears, long-dried; didn't harden their real, beating hearts into lumps of smooth, unbeating stone; didn't want to burnish their swords again and clean those rifles to use in a new kind of war. Ghosts didn't stand in the dead center of a hiding town and say, at first in a low mutter and then in a rasp and then in a hard, loud, plank-shaking demand:

"Who killed my father?"

His question hung like a storm cloud over the street, slowly spreading into every cubbyhole, kitchen closet and corner in

Montvale. No one escaped his words; no one shut them out of his ears, no matter how hard he clasped his hands over them. The question pushed its way into every dry cellar, each pantry, each bedroom and outhouse in all of Montvale, and when he repeated the words, one at a time and in a voice no louder, each word somehow took on a louder, sharper edge all by itself, as if the syllables were beating one against the other, making mountain echoes that came back louder than they had gone out.

"Who. Killed. My. Father?"

He looked up from the dusty street at a glint of light. Somewhere in Montvale, in one of the tight cubbyholes, the tightest of all, a crack appeared. Soon the crack turned into a good-sized hole and then into a door. A man appeared behind the door, tiny-seeming at first and as frail, it looked, as a deathbed mouse, but in a matter of minutes the man achieved a remarkable metamorphosis. In the shadows of the doorway, he grew teeth and bones and flesh, filled out to room size. The new lion of a man wore a pocket watch and a suit to go with it, gray-striped, red-white-and-blue suspendered. He wore white shoes, so white and daily polished they looked painted on fresh each morning. The man's lapels were as big as his hands—the lapels wide for holding and the hands large and moist for doing that chore. Babies would lodge easily in those hands, and those hands could wave to crowds a mile deep; the littlest boy in the back row would feel they were waving right at him, turning over and reaching out right for him alone, lifting his shirt to reach right into his very red heart and pluck out the wishes there and then form those wishes into real clay. Those hands could be everywhere at once—patting, nudging, cajoling, punching lightly with the punch of a shared joke. They were hands to be laid upon the head, hands to heal any wound of mind or soul.

They were a doctor's hands.

Or the opposite of a doctor's.

The hands moved out of the shadows first, pulling the rest of the body with them. And then appeared the plump suit and Old Glory suspenders; the pocket watch, with Abe Lincoln's face etched on the case, hanging at just the right loop over the vest; and then above it all appeared a face to match the hands, all smile and thinning hair, and kind cow eyes as wet as his palms and the color of an August sky reflected in a fish pond. The nose of a Caesar. And teeth, so many and so white and wide they made you smile and forget the real hard look at the bottom of those fish-pond eyes.

The man, all of him, stepped with a grunt into the sunset, stepped heavily off the porch of his office and held out his large, moist hand, offered his moist, hard eyes and thin, smiling mouth.

"Well, well," the man said, "and here you are after we just rolled

up the banners and put away the cakes and pies and let the ice cream melt and sent the marching bands home."

The damp hand remained suspended in air. "Tell me what happened to my father."

"Well," the lion, the fat man, said, moving both hands to his lapels in one deft, curving motion, "it's a complicated business.—

"Tell me who killed him." His fingers moved around the hilt of his rusty sword.

The fat man drew his lapels back, slid his hands down into his cavernous pockets. Despite the marvelous control of his face, sweat beaded on the hairline of his forehead and the top of his lip. Mustering all his best attributes, in a voice that for any other listener would have been accompanied by a firm, friendly arm around the shoulder, he said, "Well, he just up and died."

"That's not the truth, Mayor."

"Well, son, I'm afraid it is. You see, after your daddy learned that both your brother and you was killed over at Gettysburg, well, he just sort of gave up hope. A couple folks even heard him say words to that effect. He said, 'Life ain't worth living without my boys, I can't see any use going on this way.' And he just gave up on it. 'Course he didn't know you were alive and all, none of us knew that. And that's the damn shame of it, because that might have turned the trick. I really think it would have. He loved you, son, always said you were his favorite. It's a damn shame he didn't know you were safe."

With any other man, he would have ended this speech with a firm squeeze on the shoulder and then separation, to be followed by a walk down the street and a light on a new cigar.

"Who shot him?"

Again a line of sweat broke on the fat man's brow. "Well, now, we never did find that out. Consensus was, it was a hand he had working over there with him, named Lucius. Black fellow. Ran away after the shooting, so we figured it must have been him. Sheriff Deacon, he did a real good job trying to track that boy down, but just had no luck. None at all. And couldn't find any reason to think it might have been any other way. Unless of course. . . ." The mayor caught himself before plunging ahead, and then, feeling he had to complete what he had started, said in a much lower Tm-real-sorry-for-you,-boy' voice, "Unless, of course, your daddy took his own life."

Eyes, blue-gray ice, turned on the mayor.

" 'Course we ruled that out," the mayor added. "Doc said there was definitely foul play. 'Course people always will talk . . . But we're sure, we're all damn sure, that black fellow did it."

"I heard otherwise."

"Did you?" The mayor feigned slight amusement and reproach.

Once again his hand reached out of its own accord to grasp, to assure; once again the hand fell limp to crawl defeated back into the mayor's pocket.

"Like I said, I heard otherwise."

His finger moved smoothly to the stock of his rifle, felt the old use there, the tiredness, the defeat. With practiced effort, his fingers sought to warm the rifle back to life, put the spark of death back into it. "What I heard was, the whole town murdered him." His voice stayed cool and even. "I heard lots of things." Once again his eyes bored into the fat man. “Tell me, who owns my father's land now?"

The mayor's sweaty hands had nowhere to go, nothing to hold onto and squeeze with falsehood. They played around his pockets, his lapels, his watch chain, and finally his watch, winding it so hard the spring inside broke with an audible sound.

"Town owns the land, of course. Your daddy never did settle his claim on it."

The other spit on the ground, not missing the mayor's white shoe. "I saw what you did with that farm. Couldn't wait to get your hands on it. The house and barn are already half torn down."

The sweat had disappeared from the fat man's lips and brow. "Soon be ten new homes out that way, with ten more planned next year."

He brought his war gun up, but hands not the mayor's were laid on it. His eyes swiveled to see that others had come onto the darkening street.

"I think we got us a suspect in that little girl's death last week," the man who laid his hand on the rifle said. He had a dull five-point star on his shirt. Firmly he took the rifle away. "Shame about your brother at Gettysburg," he said. “Heard he was a real brave boy." The sheriff grinned, a yellow, dull, tobacco-stained smile. "And don't you worry about Lucius. Him telling you all those stories. We know he was the one killed your daddy. We'll catch him yet. Reckon we only got to look from where you came." He said quietly to the mayor, "I fear we'll be having a hanging, maybe two, before long."

The mayor replied, his hands finally finding safe passage on the lawman's shoulders, squeezing them, "I think we best have one of those hangings before another sun gets high."

In the night he heard quick hammers working. Steel nails met and kissed wood, and at dawn, through the bars of his cell, he watched them prove the rope tight and true.

They led him up the scaffold and put the rope around his neck. He still wore his dusty uniform. He did not look at any of them, but stared straight ahead as they tightened the noose and stood back.

There over the hill, he could just make out in the rising light his father's farm, the ruined beams of the barn, the skeleton of the carousel. . . .

He felt the floor give way beneath his feet and the rope close like two cruel hands around his neck. It was then that he screamed, not in pain but in raging promise, spitting out one word over them, one word that echoed around the low hills long after his feet stopped kicking at the air.

"Rise and shine."

He was jarred from his memories by the rough, metal-scraping sound of the back doors of the truck opening. A dark figure stood outlined there. The figure smoked, and the smoke that came from his long cigarette was as black as his hooded eyes and the suit he wore. He lifted his cigarette to his mouth. His nails were neatly trimmed and pale, his skin as white as flour. He pulled the cigarette from his lips, blew black smoke.

"Our workers are up," the dark man said, smiling. "Don't you think you should be up too?" His voice both soothed and mocked.

The other grunted, rolling up into a sitting position on the cot. He spat on the floor.

"They'll be finished by morning," the dark man said.

"Good."

"Come, come, now. Can't we have a little enthusiasm?"

He spat again. "Lay off it, Ash."

Ash was silent, smoking, and then he said, "Could it be that we're feeling just the tiniest bit anxious?"

There came now the dull sounds of equipment being moved, along with the sounds that saws and hammers make. There were no shouts or greetings; it was as if some inevitable engine had ground into life and set about doing its work. Ash smiled, turning to look at the proceedings outside, and after a moment the man on the cot rose stiffly and joined him. He held his right leg as he rose, though he gave no evidence of pain.

"Look the same?" Ash inquired.

"A little," he answered, not really wanting to say anything. His eyes roamed the low hills, finally resting on the church steeple, the rows of new houses, the stores. It was the same, yet not the same. His gaze fell to the scene before him, the piles of boards and metal struts, the rolls of white lights and the red and green pennants. The ground they stood on was the same but utterly different; the barn, the house, everything was gone; even the huge oak had been uprooted, and other trees, low, scrubby, unhealthy things, had grown in its place. They, too, would soon be uprooted.

He eyed the ranks of silent workers; more were wandering down from the squat hill next to the church. A few bony-looking wooden structures had already been raised, and one was being covered in dull green canvas trimmed with red fringe. A few bright lights from the line of humming trucks gave the scene ghostly, intermittent spots of illumination.

"I told you they'd be finished by morning," Ash said. He offered his cigarette pack, and when the other said nothing, he took a fresh one for himself, lit it and tucked the pack into a pocket of his sharply creased suit. He laughed, looking at the cigarette for a moment. "They certainly can't hurt you, my friend," he said caustically. "Tell me this," he continued, his voice probing like a knife as he watched his companion, whose eyes stared unswervingly ahead. "How does it feel to know they built you your very own tomb at the top of the churchyard, at the very highest point, and then couldn't find you to put you in it?" Ash's smile stretched into a long, thin, ghastly grin. "How does it feel to be back in Montvale, Jeff Scott?"

FOUR

Someone had to be first, and someone had to be second. Mayor Poundridge was second. He tried not to be, tried to burrow himself so deep into his pillow that Montvale and the whole world would go away and not come back. But if he didn't believe in his job this morning, Emily did, and she wrapped herself in her dressing gown and made her way to the front door.

"All right! All right!" she scolded, opening the door to let in the first man to get up in Montvale. He looked like a scarecrow, all pieces of angle thrust out this way and that, and as skinny as straw. He came flapping in like a blackbird that had just seen a scarecrow come to life.

"Barney, you calm down," Emily Poundridge said.

"Got to see the mayor, Emily," Barney Bates said. His face was nearly as flushed as the red baseball cap he held tight in his hand.

"You just sit down, or at least stand still, and I'll see he gets up." She looked at him sideways. "What's wrong with you, anyway?"

"Got to see the mayor, that's all."

"All right, you just stay there." She moved off, taking a last look at him.

The mayor produced himself five minutes later, rubbing sleep from his eyes. From the back of the house the smell of coffee leaked in. The mayor shuffled around behind his desk and sat down in his chair, yawning.

"Morning, Barney," he said.

Barney Bates fluttered up in front of him like that blackbird taking flight again. "Mayor, you got to do something about it."

"Can't do nothing about it till you tell me what it is, Barney."

"You got to do something about the park."

"What's that?" Poundridge was still not truly awake.

"The park that sprung up outside my back window last night. The one you gave a permit to last month."

"Barney," Mayor Poundridge said, waking up at last, "slow down and tell me again what you want."

Barney Bates looked like he would burst a vein. "Goddammit, Mayor, they got a whole goddam park out there!"

"First of all," the mayor replied, his voice turning stern, "I won't hardly abide swearing in my house. And this being a Sunday, I won't abide it at all. And second, Barney," the mayor said, his face reddening a little in frustration, "what in blazes are you talking about?"

"Didn't you sell that old patch of land, that old Scott family land, to them carnival people last month?"

"You were at the meeting, Barney. Everybody voted on it."

"Well, it's up."

"*What?*"

"The whole amusement park. It's all there."

"Now, Barney," the mayor began, laying a hand on Bates' shoulder.

"You can see it from your top window," Barney said. "Come on, Mayor, you can see it from your window."

Shaking his head, Mayor Poundridge led the way to the top floor.

The smell of coffee was very strong in the house now. Jonathan Poundridge was fully awake, and he looked forward to that coffee.

"You'd better not be fooling with me, Barney," he said, realizing that it was entirely possible that Barney Bates was seeing things. It had happened before, and it wouldn't be the first time that Barney would have to be put away with a fit of the DTs. It had been a while, though, and as Poundridge turned to regard Barney when they reached the top of the stairs, he could smell no liquor on his breath. Still . . . .

"There, just like I told you," Barney said, pointing.

A July chill went through Mayor Poundridge as he looked out the small window. There behind the Bates' place was the "park" Barney had been yelling about. It was there in a thousand shades of tent canvas. It twisted and looped and spread itself out over the old Scott land like a lion after a gorging meal. Banners, long lengths of lights, and balloons and streamers formed its perimeters, within which lay a circus array of roller coasters, rides, games and a broad, paved midway waiting to be filled with people. A year's worth of work had been dropped on the town in one night. It looked new, but the rides and tents were in the style of at least a hundred years ago. The carousel, one corner of which the mayor could just see, appeared antique. The highest curve of the Ferris wheel edged up to hang even with the top of the church spire.

"I just don't get it, Barney," the mayor said. He felt suddenly chilled again.

"You're damn right you don't get it," Barney said, "and I don't get it neither. Can they build like that, with all that stuff right outside my back window?"

For a moment Mayor Poundridge didn't hear him. He was remembering his grandmother telling him about a carousel like that a long time ago. . . .

"I don't know, Barney."

"Dammit, Mayor—*do* something about it!"

Mayor Poundridge had the oddest feeling that someone was watching him from the top of that roller-coaster loop, that there were eyes, huge disembodied eyes, boring into him. It was only with great effort that he was able to look away.

"I suppose," he said, his voice low and thoughtful, "that we'll *have* to do something about it."

The Three Musketeers rose early. Something called them together, some magnetic change in the atmosphere that told them it was time for a meeting. The sun was barely up. Sleepily they crept from their beds, all three, dressed and went yawning into the morning air.

"I had a nightmare," Pup said when the others met him by his garage. "I dreamed there were reptiles all over me, and big laughing mouths with nothing attached to them."

"I had nightmares too," Jack said. His eyes were half-closed, his words barely yawns. "There were fish, fish attacking me, and I was underwater." Reggie only nodded quietly, "Me too."

The air was heavy. It was as though the sun was fighting its way up the sky this morning, and there was no blue to blanket it but only a slate-gray slab that made' it look as though it would either drop below the horizon in shame or hurry across to the other side. The day might grow warm later, but now there was a chill in it.

Pup shivered. Even Sprinkles, his dog, who had followed him out, looked as though he wanted to crawl off to someplace warm, a winter fireplace or the south side of a stove. Pup absently scratched him behind the ears as he whimpered.

"What are we doing here?" Pup asked peevishly. "It . . . just seemed right," Jack said.

Reggie's thoughts were elsewhere, far away.

Pup's mother appeared at the back porch: a small, nervous woman with graying hair and distracted concern in her voice.

"Pup, are you warm enough?" she asked. "Do you want me to get your jacket?"

Pup's father came out behind her, his briefcase under an arm. Impeccably dressed, he looked at none of them but walked with deliberate, precise steps around to the front of the house.

"Jerks," Pup muttered, ignoring his mother, who still stood on the porch, rubbing her hands. "Let's go inside," he said to his friends, turning to the garage as his mother went back into the house.

They drew open the doors to their treasure house. The garage was huge, a three-car port that Pup's parents never used because he had insisted he needed it all. And it was filled. Along one wall stood a solid block of bookcases, packed with every horror paperback and hardcover book Pup could lay his hands on, each in its proper place, each meticulously cataloged and stamped: THREE MUSKETEERS ONLY. Two other walls were tacked up with pictures and photos: twenty Lon Chaneys, a half-wall of Vincent Prices, group portraits of wolfmen and Frankensteins and mummies. There was a prize picture

of Stephen King holding a copy of *The Shining*. There were other pictures, movie stills and posters, filling every avail-able space. The fourth wall was lined with shelves bulging with boxes. There were crates of fangs and capes and bulbous heads and wigs; outer space faces, Spock ears and Abominable Snowman feet. There were hundreds of costumes and parts of costumes, enough to assemble any monster. Each was labeled and stored neatly. One area was buttressed by benches and workplaces, half-finished models in neat rows, stacks of day-glow paints and jars of brushes side by side with tubes of fresh glue and display cases. A hundred models were already finished: a hunchback on his pedestal, crying "Sanctuary!" Bela Lugosi stepping forward, his cape held at nose height to show his eyes to best hypnotic advantage. Other models lay half-finished in sculpted pieces. The rest of the garage was filled with everything left over: life-sized mannequins covered with mummy tape; a torture rack in pine; a few bicycle parts ready to be made into who knows what.

They drew open the doors slowly, waiting for the magic to hit them as it always did—and nothing happened.

The garage was cold. Pup switched on the lights. Bank on bank of neons flickered into gas life over-head, and still the room was cold. It did nothing for them. The magic had disappeared, leaked out of the corners like damp rainwater and siphoned off into the ground. Their clubhouse was suddenly just a big damp room filled with junk.

Pup shuddered; he was reluctant to enter. None of them wanted to enter. It was suddenly different, all of this, childish and merely play. If they entered, someone might start laughing at them for being little boys.

Quickly Pup turned off the lights, and they watched the banks blink off, one after the other, leaving the garage in gray daylight again.

Slowly they swung the doors closed.

Reggie felt colder than the garage. There was a sullen weight on him, heavier than sleep, like wet gray slush hanging around his neck by a cord. Beneath his skin, his bones felt cold. He kept catching the scent of something in the air, something just out of reach and recognition. It teased him. It was a cold, unpleasant smell. Something had been changed, altered. The lightness had been removed from the air. Dread and fear grew inside him.

"What do we do?" Pup asked. He sounded as irritated as troubled. He waited for the other two to say something, and when they didn't, he opened his mouth to speak again

Something sounded above them. Something that should have been summer but wasn't. It was like a sound an ice-cream truck makes, like sweet clinky bells, only wheezy, without the sugar and with only the

ice in common with ice cream. It was a sound they had heard before—long ago on summer vacations far away in other, larger towns. It ran up and down, bright and organ-like; the song it played was tinkly and ominous. Threatening. They all knew it.

"That's a calliope," Jack said.

Speedily they lifted the tall ladder out of the side of the garage and snapped its aluminum sections into place as if it were an erector set. They tilted it against gravity and then up onto the side of the garage. Jack, quick as a rabbit, leaped upon it, forcing the others to hold it steady lest he come down on top of them, ladder in tow. They waited, impatient, as he disentangled his sneaker from a rung halfway up. Finally he was on the roof, holding on to the television antenna mast like a pirate, peering out into the void at the edge of town.

"Holy cats!" he breathed. Though it should have been a yelp, it came out subdued, and it only sent further chills through all three of them.

He climbed down carefully, and then the other two in turn climbed up, said something similar and climbed down again.

"What do we do?" Jack asked, feeling as though he had said nothing else all morning.

"We go look," Pup said decisively.

There was silence from his companions. They all knew what it was: The cold, the chill that was in the air, blew from the direction of the amusement park. They each felt it, the presence of whatever it was, but Pup was adamant.

"Come *on*," he insisted. "We'll just go look."

Reggie nodded reluctantly, and they set off.

The calliope had sent a spell over the town. It was as though a million sleepwalkers had been set loose at once upon the world. Doorways stood open, and Montvale citizens, most of them in robes or hurriedly donned jeans and shirts, stood with ears cocked toward the amusement park. No one made a move to go farther. The sound alone captivated them. Even Crazy Frances, the town eccentric who lived in front of the barber shop, seemed to come out of her perpetual stupor and stood with her one good ear toward the sound of the calliope. There was a mixture of horror and rapture on Frances' face, and she was so intent upon her listening that she didn't even stop to shout, "He is the resurrection and the life!" at the passing boys as she usually did. Even the dogs in Montvale were alert, sitting with their ears up stiff.

Above it all, the calliope played leisurely. It played as if at a funeral, slow *tink* after slower *tee-dee-dee* in a kind of mock dirge that wove like smoke around the town.

Over the last row of buildings in Montvale, the Ferris wheel loomed.

The boys stopped. Something was speaking to them. "Go home," it said. "Wait for the right time. Go home." Their feet moved forward, hesitated.

"Come on," Pup said impatiently but found that his feet were welded to the spot he stood on.

Reggie suddenly broke free of the spell, and they followed. The town peeled away behind them, and suddenly there *it* was.

Not as wide and big as they would have thought. In fact, there was something *old* about it. Or rather, antique, because everything was spanking new, coated with fresh candy paint. They could smell it drying, the colors of blue and brown and green and red and yellow, just as they saw a slice of the newly swept midway, the clumps of rides, the Ferris wheel—wrought iron it looked like, and painted Christmas-tree colors—and in front of it, dominating everything, the merry-go-round. This *was* an antique, the horses real-looking, snarling red lips baring gleaming, yellow-white teeth, smooth flanks of red or yellow, saddles of wet-looking brown leather with real stirrups.

"I've got to be first inside here," Pup muttered, staring up in fascination at the Ferris wheel. "I've got to be."

There was a fence around it all; even if it hadn't been there, they would have felt one anyway, one of electricity or another thing equally invisible and equally repulsive. But there was a real fence, black iron, thick, with the top curling over into the park. The big double gates were closed, bolted. Not now, the place said. *Not yet. Soon.* It looked deserted within the fence, with thin new rolls of dust bumping down the walkways and between the tarped rides.

Go away. Not yet.

Without warning, Reggie felt as if he wanted badly to be home. His feet began to turn around, scuffling in the dirt on their own. He wanted to be in front of the TV, in his own room with his mother close by. The calliope hooted mournfully, its workings invisible, and somehow the music wove a voice around them that nudged them homeward. Reggie knew that the music was doing this to him, and he knew that this was not the time to fight it.

"I think we should go," he said.

Jack concurred, but Pup stood his ground. "Let's sneak in."

He knew he wasn't serious even before the words found their way out of his mouth, but once he had said them, he felt compelled to repeat them. "Let's be first in, just so we can say we were."

"I have to get home," Jack said.

Reggie said nothing.

Nervously Pup toed the ground, and then he burst out: "What's wrong with you guys? Don't you ever want to do anything new? Are you going to be babies your whole life, wearing monster masks when

you're fifty?"

Reggie and Jack were silent.

"Can't we ever do what I say?"

The calliope *doop-deep-deeped* over them. Pup, too, had turned around unconsciously and was facing back toward Montvale. As Reggie and Jack began to walk away, he turned defiantly to the gate. "I tell you I want to be first in! Dammit! Come with me!"

"I think we should go," Reggie said quietly.

"Damn the two of you!" Pup yelled. He glared at the wrought iron, his eyes fierce. Reggie and Jack were pulling away from him, leaving him behind.

Go home. Soon.

Groaning in frustration, Pup put a foot out to test the climbing strength of the metal, but before his foot touched it, he pulled it back. "*Dammit*," he muttered under his breath. The sound of the calliope ran through his ears, down inside. He turned away.

"Dammit."

Soon.

He gave a final malignant glance at the amusement park through the tall, silent gates, and then his feet kicked dust and ran him home.

FIVE

Spinning, spinning, round and round. Dust to dust, dust against dust. Bone against bone, flesh against flesh.

Lucius.

Blood from ashes, spittle from wood and stone. A tongue from salt, feet from earth clay, fingers of worms and crawling things.

Lucius, Lucius, wake up. . . .

Spinning, spinning, round and round and up out of darkness.

"Ohhhhhhhhhh."

A hundred-year wail descended into darkness, replaced by—the sound of birds.

Lucius Boforth, as stiff and old as the pines in the forest, gradually lifted his hurting eyes. He looked from the earth below him, churned as though by a plough blade, up to his knees and then, in degrees, with a hundred-year creak, to the blue sky overhead, where a fat blackbird was dipping to look at him, its eyes huge in its small black face, peering down into him before it banked abruptly and shot away.

"Good Lord Jesus," Lucius said, lowering his eyes. This body, this body of his (was it?) began to tremble as it had on the Sundays when he was a boy in front of the minister—when, more afraid of the man's wrath than of the scourging promised in the Bible ("Doesn't the Bible teach goodness, too?" he had once innocently asked; "Not when you're colored," the minister had answered with his voice and with his hand, bringing his knuckles across Lucius' mouth and then leaning over him with his eyes on fire as the boy lay in the dust at the back of the church, not trying to get up because he would just be hit again), he had come to sit as far in the back of the church as possible, trying to hide from those eyes.

The defeat in those blazing eyes was what scared him the most, made him shake and tremble. Wrath he could take, especially righteous wrath, but the assurance that life for him, for the preacher, for each one of them—for all those *colored* faces—might as soon be over now as later for all the happiness they would find in it: that was what he could not face and what made him shiver. That and the only other words the preacher had ever spoken that had frightened him: the promise of the judgment that awaited them—all of them, the colored and the white—when the final battle was fought and the dead rose from their beds of earth to see it. And even, years later, when he had washed himself of the preacher's defeat, this one stark image had clung to him like glue. And now he had raised his eyes from a bed of earth to see the blue sky again and

"Lucius . . ." a voice behind him spoke.

He knew that voice; he knew that voice like he knew his own. For

a moment a flame of joy rose in him—yes, this must be the judgment day after all, because this voice that he knew and loved was with him, as all those he knew and loved must be with him. The wife and son he had sent away and never seen again. And the others . . . . He scanned the sky again before turning around and saw something that made him sure the judgment day was at hand. The blackbird was gone, and in its place a huge silver bird, of metal, with a long white tail behind it, made its way across the heavens with a faint roar.

"Lucius," the voice called again. It was not a joyful voice. Why not? Why shouldn't the joy that he felt at this moment be in that voice too?

He turned.

"Jeff," he said. He reached out his arms, but they were stiff and covered with soil and would not raise straight for him. They dropped back heavily to his sides. Jeff Scott stood regarding him with a mixed look of sadness and revulsion and, there, a touch of happiness too. Why not all happiness?

"Jeff, the judgment day," Lucius said.

Jeff Scott shook his head. "Lucius," he said, and all of a sudden he looked as though he wanted to cry. "What is it?"

Jeff Scott only shook his head, his face covered with his hands.

Lucius looked around. Something out beyond the gates of the churchyard caught his eyes. Montvale was down there, laid out before him, but it was different. The buildings were more numerous, the town swollen. The church next to the graveyard looked newly painted, with a new addition to one side; though the main street was still where it had always been, the shops were different colors and there were more of them; the roadways were paved. There was more spread to the town, too; and it seemed more sculpted, more green. And there to his right, where the Scott farm used to be, built around the old Scott carousel, which looked brand new, a great carnival. The old farm was filled with bright tents and walkways and rides, great circles and canopies and poles.

Then his gaze came back into the churchyard, lingering over the hundreds of upturned graves, the empty, neat, sharp holes in the ground surrounding him.

"Jeff," he said.

"I'm sorry, Lucius."

Jeff Scott's eyes were dry and clear. His hands had lowered to his sides, and though there was anguish written on his features, there was not a tear mark on his cheeks. He looked the same young man Lucius had known, but he seemed to be carrying the weight of a hundred years on his shoulders.

"Jeff, the judgment day—"

"No, Lucius."

Lucius looked at his hands, at the chopped, thrown earth at his feet, the changed sky, the fading trail of the silver bird that had passed overhead. "But—"

Another voice called his name. His bones froze. He knew in an instant that what Jeff Scott said was true. The silver bird was not a herald. The sky was not the aether of salvation day.

"Oh, God, Jeff."

The other voice, the one that made him ice when it spoke his name in a whisper, whispered again. "Lucius, remember," it hissed, and he fell to his knees and closed his heavy lids. He threw his fingers over them, pressing them down and trying to squeeze them shut forever. A wail escaped his throat, but he did not hear it because of the other voices, voices he had last heard a century ago.

"Come on out, nigger boy."

He was underground again, but he was not buried. He was back in the hidey-hole in Jeff Scott's barn, quiet as a mouse. He heard the men enter. He heard them sniffing like dogs. They were laughing, and he could almost smell the alcohol on their breaths—and with a nearly stopping heart, he realized that they were slowly making their way to the back of the barn, to the corner where he lay. He could feel them coming his way, almost as though they were toying with him.

"Come out, come out, nigger boy," one of them sang, and then there was a pause while a bottle sloshed, after which there was a satisfied grunt of "A-h-h." Lucius guessed there were two of them. Their voices sounded familiar, but they were muffled by the camouflaged board over his head.

He had started for Potterville like Jeff Scott had said, and only a chance meeting on the way with the same preacher who had taken in his wife and son had saved his life. There were men from Montvale waiting for him in Potterville. The sheriff had informed them that he was wanted for the death of Jacob Scott, Jeff's father, and if he showed up there, they would certainly hang him, or at least return him to Montvale for hanging. The preacher had told him to go back to the farm and hide until the next day, when he would come to sneak Lucius to safety.

The preacher gave me away, he thought in horror.

"Hey, nigger," one of the voices shouted, "we gonna get you!" The other one laughed, and then they both took a drink. Then, horribly and slowly, the trap door above Lucius was raised.

A shotgun barrel came down close to him before the door was raised all the way and two faces looked down on him. "Well, damn if I wasn't right," one of them said. The other just smiled. They were the Major boys, John and Henry, who had been friends of Tom Scott's when Tom was a boy. They had played at the farm more than once.

Lucius remembered that their father had paid three hundred dollars each to keep them out of the army in the war.

"Why are you boys doing this?" Lucius asked, half-raising himself out of the hole and trying to keep his voice as steady as possible.

"Back down, pickaninny," John Major ordered, pushing him with the snout of the shotgun. He took aim playfully along its barrel, the twin holes lined up with Lucius' eyes. "Bang," he said.

"I've got no quarrel with you," Lucius told him.

"They hanged ole Jeff this morning," Henry Major said. He was wiping his sleeve across his mouth, and he took another swill from the bottle before handing it to his brother. He smiled down at Lucius. "Good thing I remembered this hidey-hole we used to play in. Thought of it while I saw old Jeff kicking at the breeze. "

"Oh, God," Lucius moaned, but even while he was saying it and feeling so bad for Jeff Scott, he also felt bad for thinking of how that preacher had turned him in.

"Well, Henry," John Major said, "think we ought to shoot him here or take him to town to swing like Jeff Scott? Reward's the same either way."

Henry stretched, putting a hand out for the bottle that his brother didn't seem inclined to give back. "How about let's shoot him here?"

"Now, boys," Lucius began, but suddenly the end of the shotgun, which had dipped a bit as John Major drank, spurted white flame out of one barrel and he was pushed back against the bottom of the hole until the world went away.

He felt the moist movement of things in the earth around him. He looked up to see other faces with averted eyes, figures shoveling dirt over his unmovable body. He tried to cry out but could not. He knew he was not dead, although his chest was on fire and he felt dead below his middle. He felt the thud of clods of earth as they hit his body, his powerless legs, his face; a sprinkling of dirt fell across his eyes and trickled away, giving him a last glimpse of light.

It was cloudy and gray above; fast clouds with gray-white bottoms scuttled under a darker sky above. It would rain soon. And suddenly it was raining, and the men over him were cursing and hurrying their work. Dirt filled in around his neck, sending a curious dull pain through him, and then the pain was in his ears, muffling the packed sound of dirt still falling. "Couldn't they at least have sprung for a coffin for this poor nigger bastard?" he heard a faraway voice say, and then the rest of the words disappeared as earth fell over him and drowned out the noises of the men above.

He tried again to call out, to raise his arms, but could not. The earth became heavier, weighing him down. A deep slumber was pulling him into its bosom, and then there was another voice in his

ear that said, "Sleep." Someone very close to him was speaking these words, right at his ear, but he could not turn his head to see who it was. "Sleep with me," the voice said, and then the face—he could feel the face, so bright and cold, feel the breath on his neck and then, like winter ice, on his lips—moved closer, and the voice said in a gentle, cold whisper, "Kiss me." It sounded so soothing, so right, but he also felt behind the soothing tone bright anticipation and lust. There were lips touching his lips in the darkness. With a last surge of panicked life, he opened his dirt-filled mouth and screamed. He felt one of his hands, his right hand, shoot up above him, and then there was a hole in the dirt, and the gray sky, looking bright blue beside the dark of the earth, was above him and the two men were staring down at him, their faces frozen. One of them shouted, "Jesus, he's alive!" and he felt hands on his arm, pulling him up, but he knew that his shout had been his last breath and though they were pulling him up, he was sinking back underground, the fire in his chest blazing and then dying, and those lips were there, crooning to him, sucking the silent screams from him.

"Lucius," that other voice hissed again, dragging his name out in long, affected syllables and then laughing. Jeff Scott was staring past him, but Lucius would not turn around to meet the voice. He knew its owner. "I'm sorry," Jeff Scott repeated in a small voice, and then that other voice called his name again and stepped around into view next to Jeff Scott. It wore black stiff clothes, but Lucius knew its form, would know it anywhere.

"I thought you might like to help your old friend," it said, its face smiling a sharp red line. "Isn't that right, Mr. Scott?"

Jeff Scott had his eyes to the ground.

Lucius turned to the left and right, surveying the empty, upturned holes that surrounded him, row on row to the back fence of the churchyard, and then he looked to heaven once more. There was no bird there for him now, neither black nor silver. The sky was an empty slate-blue. He cried out and fell to the ploughed earth before him, and, crying and crying, he tried to dig his way back into the ground.

SIX

The gate was locked.

"*Goddam* jerk Poundridge," Barney Bates cursed. He was wondering why he had voted for the mayor; he damn well wouldn't vote for him again. The only thing the man was interested in was making sure his own tie was tied—and the hell with the rest of the town. Well, if Poundridge wouldn't do anything now—"Take it easy, Barney. Let me go through channels." Channels? Ha!—then Barney would take care of things himself. He'd be *damned* if he was going to let some loud, rowdy carnival show put its stakes down in his backyard for God knew how long. He would face the owner of this tin show himself and make the man produce his papers, or else.

He edged away from the double-locked gate—good strong iron fence, too—and moved a little way down from it. The wrought iron here was just as high but wasn't topped with curled-in spikes. How in hell did they get all this up in one night? But no matter. Going into a low crouch, he jumped with an ooof! and grabbed the top bar of the fence, pulling himself up.

Jesus, but it was quiet in there. He hesitated for a few moments, half over the top, feeling for the first time the eeriness of the place. The phrase "Disneyland for the Dead" floated through his mind and he wanted to laugh, and at the same time he wanted to climb down on the town side of the wrought iron and think about it some more. But then he seemed to tilt the other way, and before he knew it, he was down—again Ooof!—and on the other side.

Jesus, even the grass was fresh-cut. It looked greener than the summer-bleached stuff around his place. A sod lawn and everything, and all in one night.

He began to walk, and he became aware of how loud his boots were. Too loud. The grass gave way to macadam, as smooth and black as a new parking lot and with a hint of real gravel showing here and there.

He found himself among a maze of small, newly painted buildings, shut tight, green tarp across their fronts. Feeling ill at ease, glancing behind before he did so, Barney pulled the edge of one canvas back to see a hollow room. Along the back wall were shelves filled with new-looking, fat stuffed dolls decorated with long feathers. A bucket of baseballs to throw at them was pushed against one wall. The sides of the room were covered with shelves too; and these were filled with cheap toys and stuffed animals—pigs, dogs, cats, rabbits and something that looked like a kewpie doll with big wide eyes and fangs. There were also, Barney saw, a couple of big boxes filled with the usual plastic Hawaiian leis.

"Jeez," Barney said, dropping the flap and turning around quickly. He could have sworn that someone was standing right behind him. It was almost like he had felt a touch on his shoulder, a cold breath on his neck. But no one was there, and the preternaturally quiet row of games huts, all tarped, stretched nearly as far as he could see until it was abruptly cut off by a low chain-link fence surrounding a gaudily painted ride consisting of large cups attached to a central hub.

"Fucking Poundridge," he muttered. His hand brushed involuntarily at the .32-caliber handgun stuck in his belt under his sweat shirt.

Getting a sudden inspiration, he abandoned the line of games and made his way back to the midway. To his thinking, the midway might lead to the main office. Why wander around this spook land if he could get his business over with and then get out?

But wander he did. Instead of leading him anywhere direct, the path he chose drew him through most of the amusement park. He passed numerous shuttered, antique-looking custard stands and cotton-candy setups, all in spanking new paint jobs. There wasn't a spot of rust or use marks on anything, not even on the old-time hot dog carts that stood sentinel at every corner. He passed another long street of booths bigger than the others. When he peeked behind one tarpaulin, he found a shooting gallery with red-and-white wheels with bull's-eyes painted on them, along with a double row of conveyor-belted ducks and bears. Overhead there was a complicated gizmo that seemed to bring into life a couple of large dirigibles; painted on each was a face with its tongue sticking out.

Again he had that feeling that someone was just about to touch him, and he felt a drop in the temperature. There was nobody there; but when he turned back to his inspection of the shooting gallery, the feeling immediately returned. This time he resisted it, and his heart nearly climbed into his throat when a cold hand took hold of his elbow.

"Jumping Jesus!" he cried out, whipping around. There was no one there.

He felt for his handgun. A thin, cold sheen of sweat covered him now, and he thought of making his way back to the front gate as fast as he could. But that frightened him as much as the thought of continuing his search. There were probably eyeholes in most of the buildings he was passing, just like the ones in those movies about haunted houses.

"I know you're out there," he said, and was surprised to find that his voice came out weaker than he had wanted it to.

He continued walking. The shooting galleries gave way to a clearing peppered with kiddie rides, each corralled by a low white

fence stenciled with circus clowns. A faint breeze had risen, and a few of the rides—a caterpillar with a long canvas shell that would cover it when the ride was in motion, and a ride consisting of rockets hung from wires attached to a spoked overhead wheel—were creaking gently. Barney looked at the sky; with the breeze, the day had clouded over; a high sheet of grim clouds was sliding across the faded blueness and making the day nearly as chilly as September.

Barney shivered in the gray sweat shirt and sat down on the rim of the merry-go-round, hugging himself. He felt very alone all of a sudden. Someone was following him, and he dreaded the moment when whoever it was would appear. It was like putting on a Sunday shirt and then having someone tell you there was a spider on it but not telling you where. The spider was there, all right, and would appear.

"Why don't you come out?" he said. His voice was like a little child's. He couldn't help it. He wanted to run, but his legs would not carry him if he tried. A change had come over him. He was a veteran of the Korean War, and if anyone had ever told him he would act this way under any circumstances, he would have laughed or hit him. He was not a big man and had kept his leanness over the years, but he had always thought himself big in spirit. He was tough but had only demanded his due, and he knew that though he had no close friends, he had no enemies either. And here he was, wanting to bawl like a baby.

The feeling of helplessness was oppressive. He fought to overcome it. He got to his feet, noticing now the grotesque faces of the horses on the carousel. Half of them looked not to be horses at all, but other creatures: half-lion and half-bird: goats: a giant hare with eyes as big as hubcaps. "Eyes as big as saucers," he suddenly thought, remembering a story a buddy of his had told him the day before he left for Korea. Who had written it? Whoever it was, Danny Kaye had played the star role in the movie. It was about a soldier who met a witch who told him about three treasures, each guarded by a dog. The soldier went underground and found the three dogs, each in its own room, and each dog had eyes bigger than the one before. The last dog had eyes as big as saucers, and that had always stuck in Barney's mind, though he had never been able to visualize what that would look like. This hare had eyes as big as that, bigger. He thought the soldier got the treasure at the end of the story and killed the witch, but he couldn't re-member. He and his buddy were real drunk at the time, and his buddy had told him, "Go kill some gooks and bring back the treasure!" Those hare's eyes were staring at him, watching . . . .

"Eyes as big as saucers," he said, using it as a litany to break the oppressed feeling in his head. He moved away from the merry-go-

round, down the path he had been following. Nothing was quite in focus anymore. He felt feverish. He passed a sherbet stand in the shape of a monkey, and a Guess Your Weight cart. He bumped into something solid and thought someone had grabbed him by both arms, but when he pushed away, he saw that he had run into a strength tester—a long pole with a bell at the top and a pad at the bottom to hit with a sledge hammer. The pole bore gradations all the way up, from a caricature of a man having sand kicked in his face near the bottom, through a series of muscled animals, to the top—a huge, grinning beast that looked like a bear but had a horn in the middle of its forehead and flame issuing from its long-toothed mouth.

He went on, feeling now as though he had been drugged. He fell down once; when he arose, he saw that it had grown dark. A string of bulbs hung above him, leading ahead, and when it lit, he felt compelled to follow it. There was darkness all around him. He looked to one side and thought he saw in the dimness the face of another hare with enormous eyes, and as he stumbled past it, it seemed that the eyes followed him until the creature was swallowed by darkness.

The bulbs, clear glass that showed the filament, threw scant illumination on the ground. Blinking against the night blindness that had come upon him, he looked off to the other side to see vague, dinosaur-like outlines against a darkening sky: a long spire with a cage at the top, its gate swinging open; the bony grid of the roller coaster, a tiny string of cars precariously perched at the summit of its first drop; and, seeming to dominate, the huge erector-set Ferris wheel, its hinged seats swaying like eyelashes around its perimeter. "Eyes as big as saucers," he muttered once more, but now he couldn't tell if he had really said it or not.

He was drunk; he didn't know where he was. He didn't remember getting drunk. He had done it often enough, at home in front of the television or occasionally, when the loneliness of cabin fever had gathered inside him to the point that he would burst, at one of the old-man bars in town where they'd leave you alone with your beer if you wanted, letting you get as rowdy as you liked and always providing companionship (pointing to the television: "Some ball game, eh?"), if not friendship. But now he was drunk on the street. He hadn't done that in a long time—got sick with the DTs and awakened in jail. And what a strange street—dark and darker still, with only a faint string of overhead lights to show the way. Where was he? How did he get here? No matter how many times he blinked his eyes and shook his head, he couldn't clear his mind; his head was so confused and reeling that he didn't know if he was on his feet or on the ground. He was hot, so warm that he felt he must remove his sweat shirt. He fumbled with it, found that he was indeed on the ground and that his

sweat shirt was soaked. His pants were soaked too. Had he wet himself? *Where am I?*

He remembered wetting himself once, when he was five years old. He was sitting in class, and Sister Margaret was talking, and he wanted so desperately to raise his hand, to beg to leave, but he did not dare. No one was allowed to leave before the end of class. Sister Margaret had made that clear on the first day. There was snow outside, the first snowfall of November, a white dusting that was already melting.

Christmas was coming, and he could almost smell it. But he had to go to the bathroom so bad that he raised his hand anyway. He was squirming in his seat now. "No," he wanted to say. "No, Sister. I promise I'm not going to the bathroom to smoke. My father smoked and he's dead now. I'll never smoke cigarettes. Please let me go to the bathroom!"

But Sister Margaret had her face turned from him. She was printing on the blackboard, her tall, straight back moving up in down in rhythm with her arm. In chalk she wrote The Capital of Bolivia is La Paz. She underlined La Paz. He thought she would turn around then, but she didn't. He dared not cry out because if he did, he would not be able to face his friends at recess. He didn't know if he could face them any-way: although if Sister Margaret turned around and saw his weak, waving hand, she might let him go to the bathroom and then he would be a hero. He would go to the bathroom and his friends would think he had gone for a smoke and he wouldn't say he hadn't. He wouldn't say anything at all, which couldn't be a sin because if they thought he had gone for a smoke, it would be their business and not his.

"Sister!" he finally blurted out, and she turned around. She was in the middle of writing *The Capital of Brazil is . . .* , and by the look on her face, he knew she would not let him go to the bathroom. And then it was too late. When she turned around and glared at him, his bladder emptied, and as he sat there with the half-finished sentence of "Please may . . ." he felt a warm flush around his crotch and a spreading wet warmth down around the inside of his thighs. He wanted to cry, wanted to pull his hand back down and sit till the end of class, till they were all gone, Sister Margaret and his friends and all the girls to his right and left, and then he would clean up his mess and make his way to the bathroom. But it was too late for that. Sister Margaret saw the look on his face; then she saw the darkness on his navy-blue pants and the small, wet pool by his shoe, and she made an "Oh" sound with her lips. She said, "Barney, I think you should go to the bathroom."

And here he was, and he had done the same thing. He was on the

ground in the dark, and he wanted to say, "Please, Sister, may I go to the bathroom?" but he knew that whoever might be near him would not say, "Barney, I think you should go to the bathroom," and then call the janitor to help clean up his mess. He struggled to his feet. His sweat shirt was off, and his pants, and he felt the cold of a chilled wind around him. The bulbs above, clacking against their braided wire, were gone. There was darkness around him, and he shivered.

He stumbled ahead. A light—dim and sickly yellow—came into focus. He made his way toward it. Something crossed the light for a moment, moving over it like a cloud, and then he saw it clearly again. The cloud moved across it once more, and he realized it was smoke.

“Barney Bates," a voice said. It sounded like Sister Margaret's voice, but it couldn't be. Like hers, it was smooth and sure but brooked no opposition. It could help or hurt him. He almost said. "Yes. Sister?" and then realized he had already said it as the voice broke into a low, even laugh.

"You wanted to speak with me?" the voice said.

Barney was on the ground again. *How did I get here?* He pushed his body up into a half-standing position and tried to see who the voice belonged to. But he saw only that weak amber light behind a grille and that momentary passing of smoke.

"Yes," he said.

"Well?" Again that laugh, hidden in an in-sucked breath that Barney realized was a pull on a cigarette. *Cigarettes killed my father.* He was shivering badly now. He realized that he was only in his underwear and socks.

"My house,” he managed to get out. You . . ." and then suddenly he wet himself again, feeling warmth run down his leg to his sock, and he found that he was bent over. "I'm sorry. . .”

"Don't worry about it," the voice said. Barney saw something, a thin shape, pass in front of the light, and then the light was gone and he was crouched on a set of steps leading downward. He slipped and regained his footing. He looked back to see a weaker, dark-gray light shut off as a doorway closed from the outside world. He was on a flat surface, cold in his wet socks. He could not stop trembling.

"Papers . . .” he said, and then he doubled over again, crying out as his bowels emptied into his underpants. "Oh, God. . .”

"Do you want to go to the bathroom?" the voice asked.

"Yes.”

"Does it really matter?"

“. . . yes . . .”

"Really?"

He was on the cold floor, curled up.

"Stand.” the voice said.

"Yes, Sister."

"I said stand up. *Now*."

"I can't, Sister. Please let me go to the bathroom." His sphincter convulsed, and he felt a racking pain in his bowels.

He looked up pleadingly to see his sergeant from Korea standing over him. The man leered. He had always leered. He had been a stupid and vain man, and there had been more than a hint that the mine he had stepped on had not been planted by the North Koreans—or at least had been passed over by the American detachment.

"Get up," the sergeant ordered.

"You can't be here," Barney said wonderingly.

"Of course I can," the sergeant said, and then Barney saw that the sergeant had turned into something else.

"Oh, God," Barney Bates sobbed.

The figure was not Sister, or Sergeant Crimins, or the beast with eyes as big as saucers. The figure blew smoke in his face. It was black smoke, and it burned his skin like acid. The face was very white. The eye colors were reversed, the pupils' white speckled with gray, the irises black. He could see no teeth in the mouth.

"Speak," the voice said, smooth and low and not kind.

". . . Oh, God. . . ."

"You want to see my papers?" the voice mocked, as acidic as the smoke from its cigarette. "Afraid I'll make too much noise?"

"Oh, God, no."

The figure laughed, angling its head all the way back theatrically and barking out low, half-strangled gasps, as if its throat was not deep enough to bring up true vocalization. It began to cough and then threw its cigarette down at Barney's feet. Barney moved to pick it up, but the figure made a sharp move of dismissal and he stood where he was, straight up now, and shaking and cold and wet.

"Time to see my papers, Barney Bates," the figure said, and then it was Sister, and she did not have the knowing look on her face as when she had turned around from the blackboard, but rather the look that said, "No, you can't leave," and Barney saw her bring the ruler out from under her cassock, the one she always seemed to have hidden in her right hand. She raised it above him, and then he remembered his gun. He had a gun and he would use it on her. Miraculously he found it still with him, tucked into his underpants, inside the tight elastic. It was cold against his belly. He pawed it out, pleading, "Sister, just let me go to the bathroom," but as he held it up, her hand, the one with the sharp ruler, came down and knocked it from him. There was great pain in the hand that had held the gun, and as he looked up, he saw that Sister was gone, and in her place was that dark figure again, the horrid, toothless thing with the cigarette and the inside-out eyes.

Barney tried to say something, but when he opened his mouth, he found that he was already screaming, and as he looked at the hand that had been hit by the ruler, he saw why he was screaming: The flesh had been stripped from his fingers, and that all that remained was the white, dry bone of skeleton. His bony hand was curled up on itself like a claw. And then he saw that Sister, once again, was back and that she had raised the ruler high over him, mouthing the word "No!" and when she brought the ruler down upon him, the scream that he was screaming was ripped raw and bleeding from his throat.

SEVEN

Reggie felt someone's eyes on him.

In the closet, with his comic collection spread around him, something cold settled on his neck. But when he turned, there was nothing to see. He brushed at his collar; the washing-instruction labels on his shirts sometimes dug into the back of his neck and irritated it. But the label had been ripped out.

A curl of cool air passed over him. Again he turned from the closet to find nothing there. Even the window was closed, the air conditioner off, since the day had stayed so cool.

I'm here . . . .

The thought brushed across him, as that cold breath had. Suddenly he felt dissociated from himself, as light as air. He hadn't felt this way since the day he had been hit by the truck. He was half in the world and half out of it; he felt like he was back in the tunnel with those two figures, one reaching to whisper horribly in his ear, the other watching impassively. And then, as if a cloud had passed over him, the feeling was gone.

He shrugged and turned back to the closet. It was a small cubicle, barely a couple of feet deep, but all the walls were lined with stacked comic books. These were things he didn't even let the rest of the Three Musketeers put their hands on. They were carefully arranged and cataloged, with big hand-lettered labels his mother had helped him with (after she had finished her calligraphy course and wanted to try it out), and they were stacked according to date. Knowing that the really expensive and famous comics were beyond him, and not really interested in them anyway, he had started gathering some of the more available, although weird, titles. He had all issues of *Superman* published in the 80s, and he also had the whole short run of *Nukla*, about a superhero who got his powers from a dose of lethal radiation. He had all of the *Twilight Zone* comics published in the 1960s.

The thing that separated him from other collectors, though, and made him a blasphemer in most eyes, was that he actually read his comics. As far as he was concerned, he wasn't collecting so that someday he could unload the whole mess and make some money—he collected comics simply because he loved them. A lot of people didn't understand this, including Pup, who couldn't see the use in doing anything unless you got something out of it. He often asked Reggie why he was always taking his books out of their protective glassine bags and reading them—"junking them up" was the way Pup put it—and Reggie couldn't make Pup understand that he did it because he loved them not for what they were as possessions, but for what they were in themselves.

"There's great artwork in these books, and some of the stories are as good as the stuff you read in regular books, and the way it all goes together makes it like nothing else," he'd say, but Pup would give him that blank look, half-put-on and half-serious, and Reggie would give up. Pup's problem was that he had too much, since his parents seemed to own half of Montvale and he got anything he whined for. "Too much," Reggie's mother always said, and no one had ever denied it.

I'm here. . . .

Reggie was lifting the last two books from his "Toss-in" box, where he threw them after he'd finished reading them and where they waited for him to re-file, when a cold hand slipped around his neck and tightened slightly before letting go. He gave a yell and jumped up, but there was no hand and no one there for it to be attached to.

The feeling that he was back in the tunnel returned, and Reggie looked up to see in the corner of the room, up near the ceiling, a pair of huge eyes staring at him. They gazed unblinking until they faded, like the Cheshire Cat, into the sharp corners of the ceiling and nothing was there. *I'm here, I'll be here*, he heard, and then the feeling of dissociation disappeared as if it had never been, and he was alone.

A real shadow caught his eye at the window, moving from right to left against the pull-down shade over the air conditioner. Reggie stood dead still and watched the shadow cross back from left to right. He dropped the two comics he had in his hand and walked to the window.

For some reason, he was not afraid. The other presence was entirely gone; whatever was behind the shade was something else—but the other thing, the eyes that had been with him, had left a feeling be-hind, a strength, that stayed with him now.

He lifted the shade on the window—

And screamed.

There was a face pressed up against the glass. At first he thought it was his own face, distorted and beaten and old. Now he saw, as the face pulled back from the window, that it looked only a little bit like him. It looked more like his father had, only much older; and for a moment of hope and fear, he thought it might be his father, returned after ten years to live with them again. But the face was much too old—lined with deep black crevices and with pain sunk into the eyes so deep that the eyeballs were scarcely visible. But they could be seen, and when Reggie saw how brightly and desperately they burned within their deep, hurting wells, he cried out again.

It was the face of a dead man, like something from his horror comics.

The old man had stumbled back away from the window. He seemed as terrified of Reggie as Reggie was of him. The old man

stared at him, his sunken, haunted eyes lit wildly. Reggie eased open the window over the air conditioner and as he did so, his pressing arm hit the -On" button. The air conditioner roared into life. The man outside moved back-ward and started to stumble away. Reggie threw the window all the way up.

"You!" the old man croaked at him in a half voice.

"Wait!" Reggie shouted.

The old man gave a shrill, tinny scream. He held his hands in anguish to his head. "Flames!" he shouted. "The dream!" And then he suddenly turned as if pulled by an invisible magnet. He lurched away from the house, onto the sidewalk and across the street. A car, honking its horn loudly, narrowly missed him, but the old man paid no heed, pushing off the hood and running on. His legs would not carry him as fast as he wanted to go and he fell, rising and stumbling on.

Reggie ran from his room, making it out onto the front lawn in time to see the old man disappear around the corner of the house across the street. His cries faded. Reggie considered following him, but he saw that the old man had made a direct line for the amusement park.

I'm with you. . . .

Once more a coldness enveloped Reggie. He looked up, expecting to see two huge, fading eyes glaring at him. But as quickly as the sensation came, it was gone. He was left staring at the brooding, girder-like visage of the amusement park. It looked reptilian. Another feeling gripped him—one of dread and foreboding; and a deeper kind of cold, with fingers that wanted to hold and squeeze him till he choked, enveloped him. Once again he saw before him a vision of Montvale in flames, the fire of Breughel's "The Triumph of Death," a red landscape, and from the midst of the inferno a sticklike hand, covered in a black sleeve, held out to him. At the end of those fingers was the cold touch, the hurting one that sought to reach inside, and then the arm extended back to a body and a face, the face whispering, soothing him and pursing its lips, opening its mouth wide, telling him something, something secret for him alone as the flames and the cold mingled:

"K—"

He shook the vision off, ran into the house and shut the door behind him. The house was cold. He went back into his room, but the chill was just as great there. The light was too harsh. He stared down at the pile of comics he had left; now they looked like just a pile of newsprint, unimportant. They seemed trivial, a little boy's escape reading—like all the things in Pup's garage seemed trivial too.

So it's real. Something is really happening.

Reggie felt his heart harden a little. He had suddenly grown older. All the things in his room, the horror books and models and masks hanging on the corners of the bedposts, were just toys. He hadn't imagined any of what had happened; it was all real. The only important thing in the room, the one thing that had any meaning at all, was the poster over his bed, the painting of Breughel's landscape of death; and as he looked at it once more, the red fire began to dance, and that hand, that long white hand, reached out toward him. . . .

EIGHT

Pup Malamut was furious. He had always known his parents were idiots, but now there was no doubt left. Ever since the age of three, and probably even before, since he couldn't really remember beyond that, he had been able to get whatever he wanted out of them. Just by making a certain face, or a certain noise—or, later on, just by making everyone around him so miserable that it was easier to serve than to punish him.

And with the money his parents had, they could serve him a lot. He had more things than anybody he knew: two bicycles, a snowmobile for the winter and a pair of water skis for the summer. Most of these things he never used. It was the acquisition itself that gave him pleasure. He liked getting things out of people, and the only people he couldn't get things out of were those he made friends with. Like Jack and Reggie—they were the only two guys at school who hadn't given in to his bull about needing money for lunch, the only two who hadn't listened to his threats that his father could make life in Montvale miserable for their parents if they didn't do as he said. They'd both told him to buzz off. At first he had tried to get to them in other ways, even using physical force since he was bigger than either of them. But nothing worked. Eventually he came to them as an equal. Neither of them was particularly tough, but the very fact that they hadn't knuckled under to any of his tricks made him respect them and seek out their friendship. And that had come easily enough; all they had demanded was that he not "act like a jerk," as Jack had once said. After a while he had found that he was part of the Three Musketeers and that he didn't have to act like such a jerk around the other kids either.

But that hadn't stopped him from acting that way around his parents. He despised them, in a way. They were rich and weak. His father was president of the largest bank in town, his mother a social butterfly who headed the various committees that ladies of her sort were always creating or chairing. The funny part about it all, to his mind, was that they had never tried to blame him for their misfortune in child-rearing; they had always blamed themselves for producing a son neither good-looking nor conversant in the social graces they supposed their social standing required. Pup was big and awkward, with an unathletic body and a non-intellectual mind. The way his parents continually flogged themselves around him, and their sad looks and half-veiled allusions to "weak genes," only made him hate them more. At an early age he had learned of their imagined failure in him, and he had quickly discovered how to make them pay for it. They paid in money and in continual mental anguish; and Pup found

that by merely pointing or throwing a fit, he could have whatever he wanted. For them, it was easier to give in than to try to understand. For Pup, that was just fine.

But now he was furious because they had said they didn't know if he could be the first one in the new amusement park when it opened.

"You mean," Pup had shouted at his spotlessly dressed father, "that you don't control the damn thing?"

"No," came the reply.

"Well. I want to be first in there anyway," Pup had said. And then he had stalked to his room, slammed the door and begun to brood.

When Pup brooded, he did nasty things. Once, when he was four years old, his parents had told him that he had to get rid of a frog he had captured from Mailer's Pond and was keeping in a jar by his bed. They said it was dirty, that it would die in the house and that he would have to get rid of it because they knew he wouldn't take care of it. Pup went into a rage. Before he went to bed, he screwed the lid of the jar on tight, plugging up the air holes he had put in it, and in the morning he had flushed the dead frog down the toilet. When he got home from school that day, he screamed and pounded on the floor, accusing his mother of destroying the frog while he was away. "You killed it. How could you!" he wailed, and his mother had stood by helpless, unable to understand what had happened to the frog and unable to calm down her son. In the end they had bought him a dog.

And a curious thing happened with that dog. Pup found himself becoming attached to it. And now, nearly ten years later, his dog Sprinkles (so named because the night his father had brought the puppy home he had, with his typical lack of grace outside of business, held the dog so clumsily that it fell from his arms and into a bag of groceries, spilling a canister of chocolate sprinkles all over the floor; when his mother began to scream, Pup had only laughed, watching the puppy lick up the tiny candies. He had made sure the dog got all the sprinkles he wanted, and later, when the dog was sick in his room, he had cleaned up the mess himself and not let anyone else know about it) was the only creature outside of his friends Jack and Reggie whom he tolerated.

"Sprinkles," he called, and the dog climbed ponderously up onto the bed and laid its head in his lap. There had been a time when the dog could have leaped onto the bed, but that was past. He was getting old, and when he ran, he sometimes panted. When he had gotten sick the year before, his mother had timidly hinted that maybe it was best not to let the vet do the small operation on him that was needed—that maybe another dog, a new one, would be better. After a few days of Pup's spite, she had begun to think differently and the dog had been delivered home, patched but alive. There hadn't been any talk about

another dog after that.

The problem now, though, was what to do about the new amusement park. Pup wanted badly to be the first through the gates when it opened; wanted to parade himself and his two friends through all the exhibits and rides, maybe even get a private showing of all the equipment from the manager. But if his father was unable to arrange this, other plans had to be devised. Pup burned with desire for the place; he had been watching it through his telescope all day.

"Stay, Sprinkles," he said, moving to the window and swiveling the scope back toward the amusement park. He had wheedled the instrument out of his parents after seeing the stars one night through Jack's, and he had used it for nothing but spying on other people and watching downtown from his upper window. Through it, he had once seen Lavinia Crawford undress. He had missed nothing, and ever since then, he had had the scope pointed in the direction of her house four blocks away.

It was getting late in the day, but there was still plenty of light to see by. He slipped in a higher-magnification eyepiece and focused on the top of the Ferris wheel, jutting like a big eye over the row houses between himself and the park. The top seat of the Ferris wheel looked as though it was swaying back and forth. . . .

He gasped at what he saw and for a moment pulled his eye away from the scope. He regained his composure and looked through the instrument again. For a second he saw nothing but the swaying side of the red-enameled seat, a silver stripe running around its upper edge, and then—yes, again he saw something. A bare arm above the edge, then a long, slender, naked back, and then the hint of a breast and then Lavinia Crawford turned full-face toward him. She seemed to look straight at him as she stood up in the car completely naked, her mouth open and thrown back, panting, her breasts high and rounded just as they were that day he had seen her undress. Both her hands were down between her legs, the fingers playing in and out. . . .

And then, all at once, she was gone. She slipped, snakelike, down into the open car, and Pup could not find her anymore. He realized he was breathing fast, and he quickly swiveled the telescope away from the Ferris wheel and to Lavinia's house. The bedroom window was open, as it normally was, but there was no one there. Pup angled the scope back to the top of the Ferris wheel. But now he saw only the red seat swaying gently back and forth, back and forth. . . .

He kept the scope trained on the seat for five full minutes but there was nothing else to see. Only that unnatural swinging of the car. He could have sworn it was Lavinia Crawford and a chill ran up his back as he remembered how she had seemed to look straight at him. Of course she couldn't have been, but that was the way it had looked.

Systematically he swept the instrument over all the rest of the amusement park that he could see and found nothing of interest. It looked more like an attraction closed for the winter than something getting ready to open soon.

One last time Pup swung the barrel of the scope up to the top of the Ferris wheel. His heart skipped a beat. There, once more, was Lavinia Crawford, looking into his eyepiece, a languid smile on her face. Pup knew she was looking at him: there was nothing else for her to be looking at. And then once again she was gone, sliding down into the car. One long, nude leg appeared, slim foot flexing, and then this too disappeared.

"Come on, Sprinkles." Pup said, pushing the telescope out of his way and picking up his golf jacket. The old dog looked at him uncomprehendingly, but when he spied Pup turning up his collar, he bounded from the bed and gave a weak yelp. "Not so loud." Pup cautioned, and they made their way quietly down the stairs to the kitchen.

He could hear the television going full blast in the living room: by now his mother would be half-asleep in front of it, watching *Live at Five*. He stopped at the kitchen counter to pull a few Oreos from the open box. He put one in his mouth as he moved to the back door. Sprinkles walked happily beside him, half-climbing up his leg until Pup bent down and shoved a cookie in his mouth.

It was chillier than he had thought it would be outside, and he tightened the jacket zipper under his neck. He broke into a trot. Squinting, he could just see the top of the Ferris wheel over the rooftops.

"Coming, Lavinia," he said, smiling to himself.

He still couldn't believe she had been beckoning for him. But why not? He'd once had the impression she knew he was watching her through her bedroom window when he'd heard her remark to one of her checkout-counter girlfriends in the supermarket that someone was "always trying to cop a look at me." When she'd said it, she'd turned full-face on him with that same half-pouting look she'd had when he saw her through the telescope, and he had fumbled on the checkout line with the *National Enquirer* until she looked away.

So why not? Who the hell knew how hard up she was? There was talk that she was loose; the paperboy, Billy Squiers, had told Pup that once she had tried to lure him into the house, when he went to collect the weekly fee, saying, "You have a minute? I think there's something wrong with my television." She had been wearing only a robe, and not much of that, Squiers had said. When Pup had asked him why he hadn't gone in, Billy had blustered something about having a lot of homework to do and then shut up. That was why Pup got so pissed at

Jack and Reggie—they just got embarrassed like Billy Squiers whenever he tried to talk about girls. Well, this time they didn't know what they were missing.

Without realizing it, he had quickened his step to the point that Sprinkles was half a block behind. "Come on, boy," Pup called, waiting patiently while the dog caught up. He bent down, giving him the last Oreo, and Sprinkles waved his tail happily. Pup tried to slow his gait to accommodate the old dog.

As they reached the long black fence of the park. Sprinkles trotted beside him. Suddenly Pup hesitated.

"Well, now what?" he said out loud. He felt the same hesitation he had felt before in front of this fence. He almost wished Jack and Reggie were with him. Although there was no way he could share his knowledge about Lavinia with them, he valued their coolness in situations like this. He could always ditch them after they got inside, but at least they would help him get in if he told them how important it was.

He pulled his collar even tighter around his neck and saw that Sprinkles was reacting to the same feeling that was washing over him. Fear. Maybe it wasn't a good idea after all to go snooping around in here, at least not now. Maybe Lavinia Crawford wasn't worth it. Then again, maybe she was.

Ignoring Sprinkles' low growl, he hoisted himself halfway up the iron fence and immediately dropped back down. He saw a place where someone had made marks on the fence a little farther down the line. There were good footholds there, and it suddenly occurred to him with a rush of anticipation that maybe that was how Lavinia had gotten in.

In a moment he was up and over. Sprinkles was whining on the other side, and Pup thought of leaving him there, saying something like, “Good boy, I'll be right back," but the sad look on the dog's face made him change his mind. And the chill in the air made him want to have the dog with him. After some searching, he found a spot where the bottom of the iron grating was not quite flush with the earth, and by widening and deepening the depression at the bottom, he was able to pull Sprinkles underneath. The dog resisted. Pup cursed him as, half in and half out, the dog decided to use his hind end to scrabble back out. "Goddammit, come on!" Pup shouted and then, with a heave, the dog was inside. After a furtive look at the outside world, it brushed up against him.

Part of Pup wanted to do a little snooping, but another part wanted to get right to the Ferris wheel and see if Lavinia Crawford was really there. And then there was a third part that made him feel uneasy just to be in the place.

Soon the third part grew stronger. Every step Pup took magnified his fear. Before long he was moving as though someone were pushing him from behind. He had the feeling that he was being watched through a telescope.

Sprinkles felt it too. The dog was glued to Pup's side, making angry noises in its throat and looking around furtively. The hair on its back stood nearly straight up. Every time Pup tried to brush the dog away, it pushed right back to his leg.

And then Pup was at the base of the Ferris wheel. It loomed above, bigger even than the one in the park he'd made his father take him to once when he was younger, a park that had boasted the largest Ferris wheel within three hundred miles.

And there, at the top, gently swaying still, was the red car that held Lavinia Crawford.

Vaguely Pup wondered about how she had gotten up there, and why. But these thoughts were pushed aside by his mounting excitement. There was a warm feeling spreading under his belt. Who cared how she got there? If she really wanted him, she could have him. He had read enough and seen enough of the books his father kept hidden under the storage shelves in the basement to know what he had to do.

"Lavinia?" he called tentatively in an embarrassed whisper.

The car stopped rocking. A thin, naked figure stood up and looked down at him. He wished he had his binoculars with him, but he could have sworn she had blown him a kiss. She leaned over, her breasts clearly visible, and then she stepped back and was lost to view.

A hidden engine whirred into motion, and the Ferris wheel began, ponderously, to turn. The car with Lavinia in it crawled down toward him.

Sprinkles reared back on his haunches, growling, but Pup ignored him. His eyes were transfixed on the red carriage arcing inevitably toward him. The warmth below his belt became a tight, hard excitement.

Reggie and Jack, you don't know what you're missing.

A shiver passed across the back of Pup's neck. It was as though a hand had touched him lightly, a hand that had been held in ice water. He was filled with wild panic. *What am I doing here?* For the briefest time, reality returned to him. There was no logic in all this. That *couldn't* be Lavinia Crawford in the red car—Lavinia might be a cock-tease, but basically she was a scatterbrain. She almost never went anywhere without one of her plain-faced girlfriends, carefully chosen so that she would look better next to them, and also for "protection." Pup had once heard from a high-school senior that Lavinia liked to show off but that she never gave anything out—that all that talk about

her being loose was baloney—and now that Pup thought about it, she had undressed only that once in front of the window. She left the shade up for him but never did anything in front of it.

Actually, now that a cold rationality gripped him, there was no *way* that Lavinia Crawford could be on this Ferris wheel.

That icy tingle touched his back again, and Pup whirled around. There was no one behind him, but he *knew* someone had touched him. The same someone who was watching him through a telescope. Pup was a jerk and he knew it—he had come alone to a place that gave everyone the creeps, with only an old, scared and useless dog for protection. This place, he saw now, was as creepy as any of the stories Reggie told in the churchyard or that he had in those treasured comics he kept locked in his closet.

Sprinkles whined loudly.

"Be *quiet*!" Pup said, and then he turned back to the Ferris wheel.

The red car was more than halfway down. A slim hand trailed over the railing, then was gone. Pup's excitement overtook his reason. Maybe it wasn't Lavinia Crawford in there, but it was a naked girl anyway. Then cold panic, as if switched back on, took hold of him again, and he decided not to wait to see what happened. He backed away briskly, moving toward the distant iron fence.

He was fifty yards from the Ferris wheel when he realized that Sprinkles was not with him. The fool dog was lagging behind again. He called sharply, but there was no answer, and when he looked back, the dog seemed to have disappeared. "Damn," he muttered, and began to make his way back.

He tried not to look at the Ferris wheel. Something was building here, something greater than the electricity in the air when his parents had one of their frequent fights over him, blaming each other for the way he was. That same kind of crackle was here. Maybe that was what he had felt on the back of his neck.

"Sprinkles!" he called, but there was no reply. Usually the dog at least answered him with a tepid bark. Maybe he had to take a leak; that seemed to be about all he did anymore, and he would look for a proper place to do it.

Pup thought he spied the dog inside the low retaining wall housing the Ferris wheel, his leg lifted next to the control box. But when Pup got close, he saw that what he had seen was only a painted cutout of a rabbit, part of the control box itself. The rabbit had a happy look on its face, but the eyes weren't painted right. They were too large. The rabbit was smiling cutely, like the rabbits painted on Easter-egg boxes, but the eyes looked five times too big.

Pup tried to turn away to look for Sprinkles elsewhere, but he was unable to take his eyes off the rabbit. The eyes were looking at him

intelligently. Now they were even bigger. Were these the eyes that he had felt were watching him through a telescope? He didn't know. Then the huge eyes were gone, and there was only the sweetly smiling face of an Easter bunny looking at him flatly.'

"Hello. Pup," someone said from a place to his right. Pup couldn't think. His vision blurred. A small part of his foggy mind almost laughed because he was seeing like one of those movie lenses that they smear with Vaseline: the outer edges fuzzy and the inner part sharper, though still indistinct. He couldn't remember: had he been looking at the sun? In science class, Mr. Weiss had once yelled at them not to look at the sun during an upcoming eclipse: they could focus the eclipse on white paper, but they shouldn't look at the sun directly because it would burn out their retinas.

Had he looked at the sun and burned out his retinas? No, he hadn't looked at the sun. He had been looking at the rabbit. If he remembered correctly, he thought that burning out your retinas meant that you would be blind in the center of your eyes but could still see things around the edges. That warning had scared the whole class into not looking at the sun during the eclipse and had convinced Pup not to bother with the eclipse at all. He had gotten Jack to help him with his report, and since Jack had had his telescope taking pictures of the thing, Pup was able to wheedle one of the pictures out of him and had gotten an A.

But where was the rabbit he had been looking at? And where was Sprinkles? Everything was fuzzy. The rabbit was gone. Should he call the rabbit? Should he call Sprinkles?

"Sprinkles," he tried to say, and he found that his mouth wasn't working very well either. It came out sounding like "Spin-key." Was that him who had said, "Hello, Pup"? Why would he say his own name? There was really something wrong with him. That wasn't his voice, was it?

"Pup," the voice said again, and now he knew he hadn't said it. It was a smooth kind of voice, low and almost sexy. When it said "Pup," it sounded as though it was drawing the word out with its tongue and wrapping it around him. Was it a woman's voice? Wouldn't a sexy woman's voice make his name sound like that? Like the voices you imagined telling you all those things about themselves in Penthouse?

He yanked his head from the rabbit to the place he thought the voice was coming from. His head lifted too high, and he saw a slate-gray patch of lowering sky and some fluttering red-and-white pennants on poles and a rounded pie-piece slice of the Ferris wheel, and suddenly there was the open red car, stopped on the bottom platform, its door swinging open languidly and the car itself still swaying back and forth, and there, standing on the platform in front

of it, the smiling, nude form of Lavinia Crawford.

"Oh, Pup," she said, her voice low and gravelly, like a sexy woman dee-jay. She stepped toward him, down off the platform. Pup watched her bare foot as she did this small liquid act, and then his eyes swung up to her smiling face again and down to her perfectly round breasts and the move of her hips.

"Lavinia?" he asked, but it came out. "Lars? Vina?"

"Yes, Pup," she answered, moving closer to him.

He wished he could think straight. There was something horribly right and horribly wrong about this: this must be Lavinia Crawford because it looked like her—at least the face looked like hers, and the body looked like hers had that time he'd seen her in her window through the telescope. But how could it be? How did she get here? How did she know he would come to her? Did she really want his ugly body? She was no slut. Was it because he had seen her that time and she knew it? That happened in the books his father kept hidden, so it must happen in real life. But could it happen to him? Why not?

She was so close now that he could smell her odor. And then, even in his confusion, a terror seized him again. Why didn't she smell good? He thought she should smell like perfume, or at least clean like his mother did. His mother always smelled like rose water. Not like this. This was the worst body odor he had ever encountered. Like sewage. And he couldn't see her face now: it was as though someone had rubbed Vaseline all over the lenses of his eyes.

"I want you," Lavinia purred, and Pup stumbled away from her. This wasn't right. She smelled wrong. He turned and tried to run.

He was half blind. He tried to rub at his eyes, to get the Vaseline off, but he suddenly didn't know where his hands were. He couldn't feel them. Someone else's hands were on him now. He strained his eyes desperately and saw the inflated face of Lavinia only inches from his face. The disgusting odor swept over him again. He felt her hard nipples rub against his jacket, and her voice was in his ear:

"I want you, Pup. Lie on me." She was groping at him, at his pants. He kicked wildly, trying to escape her smell, and then he had power over his hands again. He used them to push her off. She drifted away from him, and he heard the click of the door to the Ferris-wheel car. He rubbed at his eyes. As though he were rubbing Vaseline away, they began to clear, and then his head cleared and he was standing at the entrance gate to the Ferris wheel, facing the wooden platform and watching the hypnotically swaying red car. There was still an unreleased tightness in his pants.

"Don't like the smell of sex, Pup?" someone said behind him. It wasn't Lavinia's voice. It was low and smooth, and it held no question in it. It was the voice darkness would have.

Pup turned and saw a figure, more the essence of a shadow than a solid form, a shadow separated from what it reflects, leaving only the darkness that it represents. A shadow by itself would be a frightening thing, an unbalanced and spectral monstrosity, a hole outside of nature with only nature, in its continual balance, to define and outline it. But this thing was more; it had a mouth and eyes, and two hands, and a smile that was the inverse of a smile. In one hand it held a cigarette, a long black thing, itself made of seeming shadow; and when it lifted this to its lips, it blew black smoke that subtracted from the air rather than added to it. In its other hand the shadow held Sprinkles by the neck in something more than a nape hold, painfully, as though the dog were only a feather.

Pup was mesmerized. With a fluid motion, the shadow threw down its cigarette, at the same time blowing out its last smoke. It reached under its short coat and drew out something with a smooth black handle and a long gemlike blade. It resembled an elongated diamond, too sharp to hold.

There came a noise from the Ferris wheel. Pup looked to see the door to the red car swing open as a weight from the inside pushed it out. There was a hand there, made of white bone, and as it spilled out, it was followed by a skeleton arm and then a skull and the rest of a bony body that fell into a broken heap on the wooden platform. Inside the car, Pup saw stains, red and gray and white, and there was a puddle of something on the floor of the car that looked as though it might tilt also out onto the platform.

“Not to worry, Pup," the shadow man said. That wasn't the real Lavinia Crawford." And as if on cue, the pile of bones, the stains in the car, all of them, melted into nothingness, disappeared. "You can have the real Lavinia later if you want. But isn't there something better than sex, Pup? Isn't there something you always knew was better than sex?"

The shadow's grip tightened on the dog. Sprinkles whined sorrowfully, way back in his throat, and his brown eyes, through a hollow haze of pain, beseeched Pup, as if he knew what was about to happen.

"No!" Pup said, but the word stopped in his mouth even before the shadow's free hand started a long sweep up and then down, carrying the long white blade across Sprinkles' throat. The dog howled once, an empty sound that broke into a shallow, wheezing gurgle. He went stiff and straight and then, after a moment, slack, and as the pool of the deepest red Pup had ever seen gathered below the dog, the shadow man dropped Sprinkles into it.

"Isn't there something better'?" the dark man said, and Pup, as though a door had opened for him with the man's words, a huge door leading into an infinitely long corridor, pitch black as night and

angling always down, felt the long tension below his belt break and a spreading wetness. And something like peace came over him, something like the blissful calm after a long and mightily fought storm, as the dark man turned away and he followed.

NINE

Frances' day dawned. For years and years, the veil had been over her eyes. Had she lived in other places? Yes, she knew she had. Did she remember them? Barely. There had been a house once, she knew that, but whenever she thought of the house, the pain came that made her want to forget. There had been a house, a large yellow one, with a big lawn in the front and a bigger lawn in the back, and a barn with a silo and a lawn on each side. That had been in another place, not here. In the summer, all summer long, the lawns had stayed green. Why? She didn't know, but then did it matter? Of course not. Nothing mattered but the three Hims—him I mourn, him who saves me, him whom I push away.

Where am I? She looked up and saw the Pole. But now the Pole was different. It was not the Northern Star, not the spinning heavens, not the red and white of His death and resurrection, the moving yet constant symbol of His salvation. *I am the resurrection, and the life, he that believed in me, though he were dead, yet shall live, and whosoever liveth and believed, in me shall never die.* It was something else now. It was . . . almost clear. She did not think she liked what was happening. Someone was drawing the veil back from her eyes. Now, dimly, it came to her what this meant. The veil had been there because she had prayed to Him for it, and now it was being lifted, but by whom?

She thought of the house again, and her eyes hurt.

Why wouldn't that pain leave her? She sometimes saw children who lived in other houses, saw their perfectly formed bodies, bursting with His life, as they ran past her. She cried for them because they had no notion of the fullness of Him, of the life He gave to them and to all things, did not know of His Book, although they sometimes threw verses of it at her. "He is the resurrection and the life!" they sometimes sang at her, mimicking her own pure words, which made her weep all the more for their ignorance of the precious gift He gave them. Life! They skipped as they sang or stood with their hands on their knees—some of the girls with their hands on their bare knees. Filled with life. They wore skirts, or shorts, or pants, all of the same color, faded blue, with sneakers and tee shirts. Through the tee shirts Frances could almost see their forming breasts, nurturing vessels for future life—all made possible by Him. Him who saves me.

What was that? She doubled over in pain, straightening slowly. The sidewalk under her seemed covered with colors, wet to the touch. When she reached down, the colors were gone, in their place a . . . house. It was like looking into a clear pool on a day when the bright of the sky made the water reflect like a mirror. There was the yellow house, with the green lawn all around it. Painfully she looked away

from the vision, straining her neck up toward the sky. It was not bright and blue; it was dark and gray and heading for twilight, the kind of half-light that promised cold thunder to come. Her eye passed down and rested on the Pole for a moment, and suddenly it became to her only a white-and-red-striped barber pole bolted to the dull stucco wall outside a barber shop. Where was she? Where had she been? The veil was pulled partly away, the sustaining, comforting veil, and her mind was cleared. She was suddenly afraid. What was she doing here? Shouldn't she be in—

"Please, no!" she cried, clutching at her middle and doubling over. Her dropping gaze had passed over her hand, and the sight of the aging, wrinkled thing where her own beautiful young hand should be terrified her more than anything. Could she be this old? Could this much time have passed?

The house. Him I mourn.

Her eyes lowered, more of their own volition than by an act of will, and the crystal pool on the sidewalk was still there. It seemed lit from within, throwing out a soft web of luminescence like a just-abandoned dream. Was that what it was, a dream?

Cows.

There were cows by the house. Off to the right there were two—no, three—white-and-black heifers cudding silently at the green grass. They were fenced in by a thin, waist-high wire attached to slender poles, looping away from the house in a lazy circle. Electricity, she knew, ran through the wire.

How did she know that? Frances tried to pull her eyes from the pool but was unable to. She heard sounds now, the faint clucks of chickens in the coop behind the house, the grind of a tractor off somewhere in the distance, moving steadily against the earth. The tractor hesitated, and then went on. Another sound came, louder and clearer and very close. As if she were looking through the lens of a camera, someone passed into her vision from the right, nearly blocking out the entire front of the house. The dark outline of a man crossed her vision and went out of sight to the left, leaving a thin trail of dark smoke behind. A screen door creaked open and then whacked shut. Frances saw someone on the porch of the yellow house.

The figure left the porch, coming toward her. As it neared, its features became clearer, finally resolving into those of a young girl: tall, with a boyish haircut but still, despite this, feminine. She was about fifteen years old, Frances knew, and there was something wrong with one of her ears—it was twisted and gnarled out of shape.

Walking hesitantly, the girl neared the huge barn, one of whose rust-red doors was wide open to reveal a coolly darkened interior. She paused, looking back pensively, and then abruptly entered.

In the pool at her feet, Frances followed the girl's progress. The barn was dark at first, and then the light adjusted. The floor was covered with sawdust and hay. A few wooden buckets and a mop were propped against one wall. There were two stalls against the back wall and a dimly seen and crooked staircase leading to an upper loft. The girl approached the stalls cautiously, her feet rustling the dry hay and sawdust. For a moment her hands groped outward. When she nearly reached the mouth of the first stall, she stopped, leaving the inside hidden from view. Then she took a hesitant step forward.

"Jeb?" she whispered, stepping back before any answer could come.

There was none.

"Jeb'!" she said again, and then, boldened by silence, she moved a little closer. "Jeb, you there?" Still there was no answer.

She took a long step closer and called out again, a little louder.

Another long step and she was standing at the opening to the stall.

A horse had been kept here at one time. As Frances watched, she could even smell the old horse smell that emanated from the cubicle. The hay was thicker here, padded up in one corner into a rough bed with a blanket to one side. The blanket gave off a musty odor. A roughly fashioned crucifix was nailed to the back wall, and a few books had been piled carefully in one corner. They were big art volumes. El Greco. Degas. Mondrian. There was an easel with a half-formed canvas on it, painted in wild colors. Other canvases leaned their faces to the wall. Frances knew what was on them: featureless shapes and lines in black and bright yellow and red. From a small hexagonal window high up at the other end of the barn, a sour yellow light bled into the stall.

The girl went toward the adjacent cubicle, moving as if walking on eggs. She put her head around the corner and looked in.

"Empty." she whispered to herself.

There came a rustle from the hayloft above her. "Come up here," a voice commanded.

The voice had her trapped. The front door of the barn was too far away to make a run for, there was nowhere to hide in the back stalls, and there was no other way out. She felt Jeb staring at her; it was as if his eyes gave out heat rays and were focusing tight beams down at her. He was in that kind of mood. But when the girl looked up, clutching her plaid dress tight with one hand, Jeb was not there.

"Come up here," Jeb's voice repeated. There was no hint of discussion in its firm, rasp-edged tone.

The girl went.

She rose into an oppressive atmosphere. It wasn't only the air, which was close and thick with heavy, choking smells: the odor of

urine, a human body long unbathed, decaying food and damp clothing. There was something else above this, something she was moving into. It felt as though the area did not belong where it was, as though it had been wrenched from some other dimension and thrust into a place where it would not fit. The girl knew this feeling well; it was what she always felt when she was around Jeb. Wherever he was, he brought this feeling of dislocation with him. It was said in town, in whispered conferences, that bad luck, or something worse, followed Jeb like a canal barge in tow to a weighted pack horse. Most people crossed the street against his coming; the girl knew in her heart that she would do the same thing if the guilt-ridden bond of family did not attach her to him.

"Pull your carcass up here," Jeb said from over the lip of the steps. It sounded as though he were way off in the corner. His voice was oddly subdued.

The girl reached a tentative hand up over the top, then cried out as she was yanked upward into the loft. She tried to back down the ladder, but a cold hand clamped down on her head, resting there a moment before it groped farther to lift her under her armpit and haul her all the way up.

"I said come up, didn't I?" Jeb said. She was thrown down at the back wall of the loft.

She could not see Jeb's face. The feeling of oppression was horrible up here, more horrible than it had ever been before. She knew something bad was about to happen. She could almost taste it, like iron filings in her mouth.

"What did I say about her?" Jeb asked. The girl was confused—and then she realized he wasn't speaking to her. His head was cocked to one side, he had lowered his voice, sounding as he never had before: respectful, almost. The girl turned to follow his gaze. She saw nothing. There seemed to be nothing there but a pile of darkness. And then the darkness gave a rattling cough that ended, after a hawking spit, in a low, rumbling laugh.

You told me just what you wanted," the unknown form said. There was a flash of what should have been fire, and was, but without brightness. A thin plume of smoke rose beside the strange shadow to snake darkly against the light from the hexagonal window.

"You never were one for saying what you meant," the form said.

Jeb did not respond. He stood unmoving; and then he stepped forward, grabbing the girl by the chin in a way that was oddly caressing.

"When?" he said to the shadow in a desperately angry voice.

"When I say," the other answered, and the way he said it made Jeb instantly release the girl and step back into his corner.

The shadow seemed to rise out of the floor like an apparition. The girl saw that he had been sitting on a milking stool. He was wrapped in some sort of short coat, the front of which swirled as he rose as though wind were passing through it. "I'm interested in this one," the form said, moving closer and into the light, where he could be seen.

The girl gasped. So did Frances, watching in the pool of visions. For a long moment Frances closed her eyes tight, trembling. She knew that face. For an instant, like a dreamer who awakens and just misses the essence of his dream, she knew the veil was lifted farther, and she almost grasped the whole. But then it moved back into place and complete understanding eluded her. She breathed deeply, her shivering diminished, and she was able to move her head away from the pool, which seemed frozen where she had left it, to look at the barber pole above her. It was just a barber pole. Had it been something else? She knew it had, but she didn't know what. Maybe she would never know. Her mind was in turmoil, half clear water and half mud, where before all had been mud. Night, she saw, had almost fallen; the sky was purple. When had she last seen a twilight? She could not answer the question. But there was no solace in this coming night. A greater cold and trembling waited for her in the real night than in the pool.

Knowing she must, she turned back to the pool.

The shadow man lifted his black cigarette to his mouth and stood regarding the girl with something that passed for mirth. At his approach, the girl cried out. Then she was silent. This thing was like a hundred Jebs. But she might yet escape. If she could not catch Jeb by surprise and bolt past him for the ladder, at least she might go straight over the side. It was a good fifteen-foot drop, but she had handled such a drop plenty of times—though into a good pile of hay. There might be enough sawdust and hay droppings at the bottom to break her fall.

The shadow spoke, and in spite of her resolution to run, she listened to him.

"Who is Jeb?" the creature asked, and she didn't know what he meant. He pointed a lazy, pale finger in Jeb's direction. Jeb started to say something, but a glance from the speaker quieted him.

"He's kin," the girl said.

The shadow laughed, throwing back his head languorously.

"That's true," he said. "What sort of kin?"

"He's my brother—sort of."

"Sort of?" The shadow produced another ghastly cigarette and lit it.

The girl was frightened. She didn't want to speak again, but as with climbing the ladder, she knew she would have to.

"Half-broth—"

The shadow reached out in a movement similar to that of a quick-tongued snake catching a fly and took the girl by her bad ear.

"What is this?" he said, amused.

The girl cried out. The creature's touch made darkness burst into her eyes, and there was a freezing bolt of pain at the side of her head. At a gesture from the shadow, her legs collapsed and she fell to the floor.

"Who is Jeb?" the shadow asked again.

"Lay off, Ash," Jeb said. But there was no real power behind his words.

"Who told you Jeb was your brother?" Ash persisted.

The girl tried to get to her feet and fell again, legs cramped painfully.

"Jeb did," she gasped. "Jeb told me that."

"Jeb, are you brother to this kin of yours'?" Jeb was silent.

"Don't you know what the word abomination means?" Ash said to the girl with relish. "Hasn't anyone ever called you an abomination to your face'?" He threw her down, watching her roll from side to side, holding her head.

"Yes," the girl said.

"Don't you know what it means?" He motioned lightly at Jeb. "You tell her what it means." Jeb said nothing.

"It means . . . unclean in the sight of the Lord," the girl said haltingly.

Ash smiled. "And haven't you felt like an abomination? Haven't you been cast out from the realm of your fellows? Aren't you shunned on the streets when you walk?"

"No," the girl replied.

"What?" Ash said in mock surprise. "Is this true, Jeb?"

"There was no reason—" Jeb began.

"But, oh, there was," Ash said. "There was all the reason in the world. I thought you wanted her to share in this with you. I thought you wanted it to be hers as well.–

"I changed my mind," Jeb answered, still avoiding the dark man's eyes.

Ash laughed. "Do you really think she has a choice?"

"She should be able to make up her own mind!" Jeb shouted. Abruptly his voice lowered. "Like I did."

Frances pulled her eyes from the pool of visions again. She had remembered something, something terrible, and in the very act of remembrance, she had forgotten it again. But there was a feeling upon her of such deep dread that she wanted to cry out, to make it lift from her by bodily pushing it away. She looked at the barber pole again,

and suddenly she remembered the three Hims—*him I mourn, him who saves me, him whom I push away.* The pole was the Northern Star again, the spinning heavens, the red and white of His death and resurrection, the moving yet always constant symbol of His salvation.

But there was no succor left in His arms. He was cold and distant, and she realized now that His distance was of her making. He was not with her because she had thrust Him away. Had He never been with her? She wasn't sure. But He was not there now. And she knew why. A memory crossed her mind: a body peeled dry of skin and blood, with arms stretched toward her before it collapsed into a heap of dry, white bones. Was it His body? No. Then the memory faded to mist, and she turned back to the pool, dreading what she would see, yet knowing that she must see it.

Each face in the loft was outlined in shadow. She could feel the sour dampness of Ash's breath when he spoke.

"Why don't you tell, her about your paintings, Jeb?"

"Can't we just get it done with and leave her out of it?"

Ash made a clucking noise. "Tell her about the paintings. I'll tell, if you like." His smile returned, a mockery of a human grin.

"Jeb was a wonderful painter," Ash said. "Everyone agreed that he was wonderful. He painted landscapes and pictures of beautiful women—especially older women—and everyone thought he had much talent. His paintings then were nothing like they are now, nothing like these obscene shapes and black hollows and straight red lines.

"Jeb was going to go away to Philadelphia, to painting school. Even his father, who balked for years at what he thought was the boy's hobby, came to realize the talent that was there. He had wanted Jeb to farm, but his mother wasn't the kind of woman to make her boy do what he didn't have in his heart. So she had secretly put money aside at each harvest until there was enough to send him to school.

"One night she announced this at the supper table, and his father got furious. He pounded on the table with his fist and stood up screaming that the boy and his mother had conspired against him, that she had stolen money from him. His wife screamed back, and the boy, only eighteen years old and confused, sat mute while they shouted at each other until his father suddenly fell over dead.

"They buried him, and then they found that he had been stealing money himself. He had run up gambling debts that were monstrous. Jeb and his mother owed half the people in town money, and although everyone thought Jeb a wonderful painter, they wanted their money and didn't give a damn if he went to school or not.

"So Jeb found himself running the farm, trying to keep his mother from having to give up the only home she had ever lived in. The money was gone, all of it, and soon they were barely able to make

their way. Jeb's mother had never been very close to his father, but she had always worshiped Jeb, and soon they became closer than ever —"

Jeb interrupted Ash with a shout. He threw his hands to his face. The girl had never seen him shed tears. He stood sobbing dryly, clutching at his face as though he wanted to bury his thin white hands inside his head. "That's enough," he said through clenched teeth.

"She has to know," Ash replied. "There really is no choice in this, my friend." With a leering gusto, he resumed his story. "What your kin doesn't want to tell you is that his mother began to sleep with him." He paused to light another of his noxious cigarettes. "It was all very innocent—wasn't it, Jeb?— but it *was* incest." He relished the word. "An abomination if ever there was one. Then, of course, came the greatest abomination of all."

The girl stood silent as Ash favored her with his level gaze.

"A double kin," Ash said, barely keeping laughter out of his tone. "Jeb is both your brother and your father. An *abomination*, that's what you are. But the best is yet to come. Isn't it, Jeb?"

Jeb looked like white marble, a rigid statue. "Matricide!" Ash hooted gleefully.

"No!" Jeb shouted. He went on, his voice barely audible. "She died in childbirth."

"True!" said Ash. "Oh, the town found out about the pregnancy, naturally. Long before the birth date. Jeb and your mother were treated accordingly. Some said later, clacking their tongues, that it was the town that drove her to her death—that their words had started things off in Jeb's mind. Some said that Jeb was going to run away after the birthing, that he would go to New York and get a job and put himself through art school. That he would leave his mother, who loved him more than anything, because shame could not contain itself and would spill over. Those plans, naturally, were ruined when she died."

Jeb held his hands over his ears, his teeth bared in pain as Ash continued.

"Can you imagine the *guilt*? Oh, it must have been truly great. And hatred. If anything, the hatred was greater. It usually is when guilt can't contain itself. The hate he felt for those he saw as driving him to the decision, which, in his mind, had helped to kill his loving mother, was awesome. Here he was, trapped with a loathsome little baby, unnaturally conceived—and what was he to do?"

"He raised me as best he could," the girl said.

Ash's laugh was loud; it filled the barn and lasted a long time. His coat snapped in the air, and the girl saw that when Ash did not use his hands to bring his cigarette to his mouth, they seemed lost in his coat,

invisible.

"Oh, this is truly wonderful," Ash said at last. His unearthly laughter seemed barely contained. "As best he could? Don't you know what he did?"

The girl glared at him, tears filling her eyes.

Ash turned to Jeb, then back to the girl.

"He killed himself, Jeb did. He put the barrel end of a clean shotgun into his mouth and blew his head off his neck."

Looking at this vision, Frances tried to scream. She found that she could not pull away. The girl's face was lost to her completely; Frances herself was in the barn. When the girl's voice spoke, it came from her own mouth. She knew what this meant and tried to scream again.

"*He raised me*," she said hysterically. "*He was there!*"

"Oh, he was there," Ash replied. "At the moment he pulled that thick trigger he could not get out of his mind what this town had done to him. He was filled with hate for what this town had forced him to become. There was great guilt there, also—guilt that he was leaving you behind. But mostly raw, red hate. And he vowed vengeance! And lo—" Theatrically Ash pointed to Jeb.

The girl, Frances, had backed to the edge of the loft and glanced behind to see where she would land if she jumped; but in that second of hesitation, Ash was on her. A cold hand clamped on her bad ear.

"It's true," Ash hissed delightedly.

He twisted on the ear, and Frances jumped backward, landing with a scream on a hard spot below; she lay in pain as Ash laughed above.

Frances' eyes raised to Jeb, who stared down at her. His face was the face of a corpse: dry and white and filled, just below the surface, with crawling, wet things. His bones might be liquid; they might be gas; they might even be solid of a sort, but they were not living bones in a living man.

The pool of visions abruptly contracted, like water pulled down through a drain. Frances was looking at a patch of sidewalk under a bleak and dirty-yellow street lamp, with the otherworldly silence of a slowly rotating red-and-white barber pole above her. She watched the red stripe start at the bottom and climb languorously to the top and disappear into another, invisible place.

"Hello, Frances," she heard someone say. It was Ash's voice.

"Yes?" she said wearily, knowing that the veil had been lifted completely, that the third him, the him she had sought to push away, had found her. Vaguely, in her tired mind, she wondered why He had not saved her from this, had not allowed the veil to stay over her eyes forever.

"Frances," Ash said, his voice filled with soothing and comfort. It was a mother speaking to a child—a whispered promise of safe

passage in a black night. "Frances, it's been a long time. I have something for you." She felt an icy touch against her palm and looked down to see a hard, dried thing, like a shriveled mushroom.

"I'm here for you now," Ash said, his voice still soothing but unable to hide a faint trace of amusement. "I'm 'him who saves you.' Will you watch me again, Frances?"

"Yes," Frances answered in a whisper, her body beginning to quake as a horrible, fearful idea crept over her.

And then Ash's laughter began, and the change in his voice was complete, and Frances saw the great light behind her, outlining the stark white-and-red barber pole in knifelike edges against the building, and her own shadow beside it, black, and shivering like a leaf against the coldest wind. She turned to see the lights of the town, this town, and fell sobbing to the sidewalk, bathed in Ash's merciless laughter as realization spread over her once again that the veil, His veil, had somehow been pulled aside and that only Ash was with her now.

TEN

Reggie heard the calliope start up as night gave way to day. One moment there was light-bulb darkness in the house; the next moment it was blown away, the light bulbs eaten as a new sun dawned. It was a neon sun, fluorescent and bright and stark; it gave no warmth, but rather a cold literalness to all it touched. And it touched all. There was white and there was black; there was no gray or creamy white to give meaning to the shadows.

Come to me, come to me, the calliope tinkled, growing louder.

"Mom?" Reggie called. He sounded like a little boy again. He was a baby calling for his mother, asking her with a tremor in his voice to be there and to tell him what was happening. But he feared he already knew. All of it—the change that had come over Montvale since the amusement park had been erected, the fierce sharpness of his recurring dream, the vision of the dark man reaching out to him from the poster over his bed, the warnings of the zombie man outside his window—all of this told him what was happening. But he didn't want to believe it. He wanted it to be only play—play like the monster comics, the models, the horror movies and masks that had been his way of distancing himself from it, of dealing with it—of even *appearing* serious about it. Jack and Pup had always thought he was too serious about their club activities; they thought this was because he was thoughtful about how he had nearly died once, but Reggie knew that this was his way of not thinking about it, of covering it over with plastic and paint and glow-in-the-dark skeleton masks that could be taken off at any time.

The only other time he had come face-to-face with the reality of it, had admitted it to himself, was in Social Studies class when they had talked about nuclear war. There were a lot of nuke jokes that week, a lot of giggling about the pictures of the bomb shelters and people with old-fashioned clothes on, stocking concrete bunkers with canned peaches and plastic jugs of water. Reggie had gone on a binge, begging his mother to rent every available video cassette of the monster movies of the fifties. All of them had horrible things escaping from the ice or growing up out of the radioactive sea or in the desert at bomb-test sites after atomic explosions: jellylike creatures or things with too many eyes or arms or legs that either sucked you into themselves or made you burn black when they touched you. Mad scientists got X-ray eyes or atomic brains or turned into pulsating vegetables in these pictures, and Reggie loved every one of them—until he came to one he thought was just another science-fiction movie but proved to be something more. It was a documentary, and it showed what happened in Hiroshima and Nagasaki after the atomic

bombs had been dropped on them at the end of the Second World War. After that, Reggie didn't want to see any more atomic-monster movies for a while. The skin falling off living Japanese bodies like pats of butter had been too real, the shadows of vaporized human beings on cement block walls too scary. It was easy to like monster movies because they weren't for real—but this was for real.

And now he had that feeling again, and with it, an awful knowing that something *real* was going to happen in Montvale. The huge eyes and the other dark thing he had felt touch him, heard whisper in his ear, when he was in the dark tunnel, they were here and he was afraid.

Come to me, come to me, the calliope insisted. What had the zombie, the old man outside his window, screamed at him? "*Flames*!"

"Mom?" he called again, louder. His mother had been running her sewing machine, and now the machine had stopped. There was nothing wrong with the electricity in the house; the TV was still on, and all the lights were on, though they weren't needed anymore against the blinding light from the amusement park.

"Mom?" he said again, moving off the couch and into the kitchen. The house was like a brightly lit tomb. The television talked hollowly behind him, but outside, of that, the house was dead silent. He could hear his footsteps. Where was his mother? Why was everything so quiet?

Come to me, the calliope said, and he found himself wanting to go.

Then he was running through the kitchen, bumping into a chair, and dashing to the back sewing room. "Mom?"

The room was empty. The cord was yanked out of the wall socket, as if her foot had pulled it out as she rose, unheedful. The laundry room was beyond, and as Reggie walked quickly to the door, he glanced at a picture on the wall—a photograph of his father, smiling proudly in his Navy flyer's uniform, his helmet in his hands. At the bottom of the glass over the photograph there was a strip of masking tape that read: "Black and Proud."

The laundry room was empty. Reggie saw that the door leading to the backyard was wide open.

"*Mom?*" he called fearfully. As he stepped out into the yard, he saw her. It was as though she were made of stone. The whole sky toward the amusement park was lit up like a white dome. The light arced upward and out, illuminating the town like a full moon. Where the light was brightest, the Ferris wheel glowed like a circular neon kitchen lamp, with strings of flashing red and green bulbs around its rim. It was spinning too fast.

Come to me, come to me, it seemed to call, and as if in agreement, the sound of the calliope grew even louder and more hypnotic.

"Mom?" Reggie said once more, moving up beside his mother. There was a tremulous smile on her lips, and her eyes were wet.

"He's come back, Reggie," she said, her voice a whispered, happy sob.

"Mom—"

"Your father's come back. I know it." She knelt beside him, resting on one knee and taking his shoulders in her hands. A single tear tracked its way down one smooth cheek. *She's so beautiful,* Reggie thought. "After all this time," she said, "he's come home to us."

"Mom, it's not true. He's dead. He *has* to be dead."

She shook her head and smiled, and Reggie could feel the tension of anticipation through her fingers.

She let go of him and stood up. The calliope music had grown louder, and it was working a spell on her. Reggie saw other people standing in other backyards, staring up at the sky or directly at the amusement park.

"I have to go to him," she said.

She stepped away from him, brushing his hands away. She moved as if under water. Reggie could not think straight; the music was so loud and yet so soothing that it wrapped him like a winter blanket.

Come to me now.

His mother went through the back gate to the street. Reggie shouted to her to stop, but she did not hear him; she was listening only to the calliope and to the inner music of her conviction that her dead pilot husband was home.

There came a roar above the calliope now, a sharp, piercing whine that sounded like a screaming engine. His mother stopped and looked up. "See!" she cried. "See!" Reggie followed her gaze to a sleek Navy plane. It looked silver in the harsh light, and behind the cockpit window a figure could be faintly seen. The plane swooped low over the house, dipping its wings from side to side and then veering off sharply toward the amusement park.

"Don't you see, he's home!"

"Oh, Mom," Reggie said. She was going down the street. There were others there, moving like dream figures, some pointing ahead, exclaiming, "Look! Look!" Children danced beside them, sharing in their excitement.

"Mom, no!" Reggie ran after her and pulled her arm, but she would not be stopped.

"He's waiting for me, Reggie," she said quietly.

She walked off down the street, joining the others already turning the corner to the edge of town.

Jack, Reggie thought.

He ran back to the house and the telephone. He had to get the

Three Musketeers together. The phone rang and rang, but there was no answer. With a cry, Reggie threw it down and raced from the house. His mother had vanished around the corner. Every moment others were joining the procession.

Reggie ran as fast as his feet would carry him. One block, two blocks, and on each the eerie story was the same: line on line of people leaving their homes and moving toward the amusement park. Reggie passed his science teacher, Mr. Weiss, who was shouting "Cynthia!" at the top of his lungs and nearly dancing. He passed a hundred others whom he knew at least by sight, each lost in his own mad skipping movements and mutterings. And then he was at Jack's house.

"Jack!"

Jack was curled up on the front stoop, his hands pressed to his ears. His eyes were closed, and he had a rifle cradled loosely in his arms. The front door was open behind him, letting a spill of warm indoor light out to be swallowed by the white sunlight from the park. Inside, the television was on. So was the stereo. Jack was yelling to himself, "One, two, three, four!" over and over again, and as Reggie put his hand on his friend's shoulder, Jack nearly jumped.

"I won't!" he cried, eyes screwed shut.

"Jack!" Reggie screamed. "Open your eyes!"

Jack opened one eye, then the other.

"Reggie. . . ."

Jack brought his hands away from his ears. Instantly he became another person, eyes misting over, head turning toward the bright lights at the edge of town. He clamped his hands back over his ears and rose, stumbling through the doorway and into the riotous noise inside.

"Close the door!" he shouted.

When they were in the living room, he turned the stereo up all the way and then took his hands from his ears. He counted slowly, "One, two, three . . ." and, waiting, nothing happened. Only then did he look at Reggie.

"Doesn't it bother you?" he asked over the din of the electronic equipment, the blare of television commercials. "My father is gone. He saw a bunch of his buddies who got killed in Vietnam. He was a crazy person. I couldn't stop him." He stumbled to the television and turned it up all the way.

“It's the calliope music!" he yelled.

"We have to get Pup."

"I tried to call him when all this started,” Jack shouted. "His mother said he had been gone all day. She sounded nervous, said she was afraid he'd sneaked off to the amusement park alone. Then she

dropped the phone. I could hear her shrieking and crying, but it was the happy kind of shrieking." He grabbed Reggie by the arm. "I've got an idea."

They went to the cellar steps and down to the basement. There was an old television at the bottom, covered thickly with dust. Jack unwound the frayed cord, plugged it into the overhead socket and turned the set on. It began to whine like a stepped-on cat. Reggie had to cover his ears to keep out the sound.

Jack went to one corner and rummaged through a cardboard box. Most of it was filled with war mementos, dummy hand grenades and copies of Soldier of Fortune magazine. He held up a pair of blue earmuffs, pulling the curl out of them and putting them on his head. "This won't be enough," he said, and he motioned Reggie back upstairs, taking the steps two at a time. In a hall closet he yanked out a wad of medicinal cotton and tore off two great fistfuls, molding them deftly and placing them over his ears before mounting the earmuffs over them. "Get something you can tie around the muffs to keep them on me," he said. Reggie looked around the floor, finally pulling a length of gray twine from under a full bag of unloaded canned goods. But as he began to wrap it around Jack's head, Jack suddenly pushed his hand away.

"Don't bother," he said.

He pulled the earmuffs from his head and dropped them. As they stepped out onto the porch, the stereo and television were still blaring inside the house.

"You hear it?" Jack asked.

"What?"

"That's just it—nothing. The calliope is gone." He turned back into the house; in a moment the blare inside had ceased and he returned to stand silently by Reggie.

"Wow," Jack said.

They stared over a ghost town. Up and down the block doors yawned open, deck chairs set out on front porches stood empty, cigarettes still smoldering in ashtrays beside them. On one porch a black-and-white TV winked, a barely heard baseball announcer droning high and low with each pitch, his voice rising in sudden agitation, only to drop once more. A dog trotted by, looked nervously from side to side, and crossed the street away from the two boys.

The sky, sustained in its bright light, became momentarily brighter, and then the tinkling sound of the calliope returned. Its volume was normal now, and Jack did not cover his ears. They saw the Ferris wheel whirr in circular operation, and just barely they heard the creak of other rides grinding into life.

"What do we do now?" Jack said, trying to keep the uneasiness out

of his voice.

Reggie was silent, weighing the hard knot in his stomach.

"I don't know."

"I wish we had the other Musketeer with us," Jack said. "If Pup was here, we'd feel better."

Reggie said nothing. He was looking at the Ferris wheel, listening to the distant whoosh of its heavy mechanism rising against the artificial neon day. The wheel turned and turned. . . . And there in the center of it was an eye, splitting to two eyes and then coming toward him, hovering over him, unblinking. Once again that feeling of dissociation washed over him.

"Why didn't you help me then?" Reggie shouted. "Why don't you help me now?"

"Who are you talking to?" Jack asked. Reggie saw that his friend was terrified; he had the same look on his face as the dog that had just passed.

I'm here. Follow.

The eyes moved. Out over the street now, more like twin balls of starlight than material objects, they moved away from the amusement park.

"Will you help me?" Reggie said.

Follow.

"Where are you going?" Jack cried fearfully. "Who are you talking to?"

Reggie was in the center of the street now, walking away from him. Jack looked at the open, silent door behind him, heard the tomblike silence of the houses around him, saw the breathless trees, the sidewalks as bright as day and as still as night, and hurried to catch up.

ELEVEN

Jeff Scott opened his eyes.

For a moment there was disorientation. *Where am I?* Instantly he knew the answer. *I'm back.* There had been the long, cold darkness, sleep without sleep, slumber without rest or real dreams. Where did he go at those times? He didn't know. Did he go nowhere? Was that what being dead was—not going anywhere? He remembered dying well enough: the vain fight for breath, his eyes so full of pressure he thought they would burst out of his head, the sickening wetness in his crotch and then the explosion in his mind, his eyes, his lungs. And the hate—he remembered the hate well enough too. But what had happened after that? He recalled only snatches of it, bits of vision, but mostly nothing. He had gone . . . somewhere else. The next thing he remembered for sure was a damp, dark place, with the smell of rotting wood filling his nostrils. He had reached out and felt wet, decaying wood and wet soil. He had brought his hand over his body to feel his other hand, and it had felt the same as the wood and the earth: damp and soft. Then there was a great weight lifted from him, and he was in his clothes on a footpath under real moonlight, next to an open, unmarked grave above Montvale. Ash appeared soon after that, and no matter where he went, Ash seemed always to be there sooner or later. And he had known he would return to Montvale sooner or later. And later had come.

But where had he been before he had been lifted from the ground? He didn't know.

So now he was awake, or what passed for wakeful-ness. He wondered why he had to pass through these periods of rest. It wasn't like being a vampire; he laughed at the thought of vampires now. At least they could drink, even if it was blood. The truth was that he felt the urge to rest at the same times he always had; at night, and sometimes during the day. The only consolation now was that he never got insomnia. It was easy to sleep; he just lay down and one moment he was there, the next moment he wasn't.

Frankenstein. That was how, when he got into wry moods, he thought of himself. The unliving made alive. The word "zombie" made him uncomfortable—and anyway, he told himself, he wasn't a true zombie because zombies were merely the reanimated dead. They had no will of their own; they were corpses that walked and moved as if under radio control. Zombies made him laugh now, too. Everything made him laugh without laughing, even Frankenstein—but at least Frankenstein, the way he had seen him on television once, was more to his liking. The unliving made alive and whole. Frankenstein had feelings; he thought about things. The only trouble he had was that in

the movie some fool had put a deviate's brain in his skull, and you could hardly blame that on him. You had the feeling that if he had had the brain he was supposed to have had, he would not have been a monster at all—would, in fact, have been more intelligent than the cretin who created him.

But that—a suave monster in a smoking jacket, talking about physics and Mozart—wouldn't have been half dramatic enough for the movies. Nobody ever seemed to notice that it wasn't the process itself that made the movie horrifying, only that some jackass human had fucked up and switched brains.

He tried not to think about it too much. There were a lot of things he tried not to think about too much.

He rose and cracked his bones. That couldn't be helped. In the Union Army he had bunked with a fellow for a time who had jumped out of bed each morning and cracked, it seemed, each bone in his body, relishing the task. He started with the knuckles in his hands and toes and then worked his way through every joint in his arms and legs, finishing with his neck. Jeff had begged him not to do it, but he had just laughed. It got so bad that Jeff thought he would have to kill him to make him stop, but a rebel soldier had done the job for him in Fredericksburg. What his own body did to him now was something like that; no matter how gently he rose, each bone in his body cried out at the same time, begging not to be stood up. It sometimes took ten minutes for all his bones to settle into place. The first time it had happened, it had scared the hell out of him, but now he looked on it as his old army bunkmate's revenge.

With a groan he pushed himself over to the small mirror on the wall of his trailer. He did this each time he got up, and the shock was always the same. In the glass he saw his face but not his face. The features were all there, the weak jaw, the strong, straight nose, the high cheekbones that almost made his face gaunt, the curly mass of boyish red-brown hair thicker on top than on the sides. But the eyes he could not see. However hard he stared at himself, he could not look into his own eyes. They were there, and they were the right shade of light blue, but he just couldn't look into himself. He'd always faced himself this way in the morning, taking stock and getting the day's duties straight in his mind; it had always been his way of waking up. And now he was awake, or something like it, and it was impossible to do this thing. He had once asked Ash about it, and Ash had only laughed, and he hadn't asked again.

The bones in his neck creaking painfully, he surveyed the rest of the room. It was little better than the army tent he had lived in for three years during the war. But that was fine with him. A small wooden table next to his bunk, a couple of books—mostly picked up

secondhand or at library sales—on a makeshift shelf over the tidy dresser. On top of the dresser, just one thing. In the old days, a couple of pictures would have been there: a sepia print of his mother and a black-and-white photograph that Matthew Brady himself had taken of him and his buddies in the 14th Infantry, looking in the crackly print like old men around a dead campfire. A hairbrush, bone-handled, that his father had given him on his twelfth birthday. The Bible that Lucius had given him on that same day, when the two of them, his father and Lucius, decided for some reason that he was a man.

The only thing there now was a Bible; not the same one, but another that originally had belonged to a fourth grader at St. Catherine's school in a suburb of Chicago. He'd picked it up for fifty cents. When he had put his hand on it at the rummage sale, he had expected something momentous to happen, like lightning whipping out of the sky, or at least that the old leather cover would burn his hand, making him let go (after all, I'm dead!). But nothing of the kind had happened. That was another reason he liked to think of himself as Frankenstein, because the monster would have been a reader had he had the chance. There was a scene in the movie where Frankenstein came across a blind man who recited scripture to him over tea. It was probably the most touching part of the movie. The monster, even with his cursed deviate's brain, was obviously moved. No taint of evil lurked in him, only around him, in that situation.

Each day he read from the Bible, just as he had in the army. He'd started at the beginning, with Genesis, but had soon given that up. There was much more that interested him in the New Testament than in the Old. He found himself going over Revelation again and again, looking for some hint of comfort, and had discovered that whatever comfort he did gain from the book centered on Matthew's gospel. Matthew could write; he was not a blind lunatic like the other three gospel writers. He had a keen eye for detail and seemed to cut to the bone of the matter without embellishing it. And in that there was a stark poetry that made his account all the more believable. Jeff wanted very much now, much more than, well, before, to believe in all of it, the Resurrection and especially what came after it. The Second Coming was something he wanted desperately to believe in because, he thought, might it not hold out hope for himself? He was a changed man, much more cynical than he had been before, but also different in other ways. He thought things through now, and he wanted to understand his situation. He thought he had come to understand revenge, and he wanted no part of it.

But he also felt more powerless than he ever had before.

After all, sixty years ago I was dead.

He gave a harsh, grunting laugh at the thought, flipping the Bible

open with one hand to choose a random passage.

The door behind him opened, then closed, slamming shut like a screen door. Jeff felt the peculiar mix of revulsion, fear and renewal that he always did when Ash was nearby.

"Let me pick a verse for you," Ash said. "How about this? `Fear not, for I am with thee.' Genesis. Like it?"

"Go away, Ash."

"But why? I've come to summon you, dear boy. For as the Bard says, to quote from another and much finer work than the one you hold there. We must take the current when it serves, or lose our venture.' "

Jeff could barely move. A cold spot started way down in his stomach and blossomed to till his body. He felt drained, frozen.

"Amusement time," Ash said. "Actually, you won't be needed much for a while, except to calm Lucius. I really do regret having him around. He makes everyone nervous. Continually wringing his hands and moaning, uttering cries to heaven, all that. Do something about him before I do."

Jeff Scott turned, trying to control the roiling within him.

"I want no part of this."

Ash smiled, making his face look like a sack of flour with a deep red gash in it. He produced one of his cigarettes and took his time in lighting it, carelessly dropping the still-lit match on the rough wooden floor of the trailer. "This is all for you. Jeff."

"Tell me exactly who you are, Ash."

Jeff felt as he never had before, both feverish and elated. The chill in him dispersed; he felt lighter, less sluggish, than he had in months.

"You were saying?" Ash replied, ignoring the change that had come over Jeff Scott.

"Tell me all about yourself," Jeff said, laughing. He felt almost powerful. His nostrils flared, as if he were a famished animal smelling meat. "What are you afraid of, Ash? Deep down, I know, I can sense, that there's something, or someone, you're terrified of. Is it me?"

Ash threw down his cigarette. For a moment Jeff thought he would storm out, short coat snapping theatrically behind him. But he only stared at Jeff. In an instant Jeff felt his elation evaporate. "I'm extremely frightened of you, *boy*," Ash said. Jeff felt as if someone were scooping out his insides with a trowel. He gagged, collapsing to his knees and holding his stomach—he was afraid that if he let go, everything in it would spill out.

“Do you really think this is all only for you?" Ash spat. "Did you really believe me when I said that? Did you believe me whenever I spoke?" A look Jeff had never seen before possessed Ash's non-face.

Now Jeff felt as though he had been doused with gasoline and lit.

He looked up and saw nothing but blackness. Ash had disappeared; so had his room, the trailer, everything. There was only the horrible burning of his skin, both outside and inside. He could not even work his mouth to scream. He felt for the floor, thinking that perhaps he would find coolness there, but there was no floor. He was in empty space. Then the fire abated and a curtain was drawn aside, and he had a vision, a remembrance of the kind he had when he "dreamed."

He was back on his daddy's farm. It was a glaring, bright day; the sky was so full of daylight it hurt his eyes. He looked down and saw that the brightness was reflected off the ground, which was covered deep in virgin snow. The sky was the kind of deep sapphire it was after a good strong snow storm. There was a sheen of thin, icy crust on the snow, as though it had partially melted at the height of day and now was freezing again. It was late afternoon, by the sun.

The oak in the front yard, ponderously tall even when denuded of leaves, held a thin white frosting along the top of its gray branches. For a moment it was like a perfect color snapshot, the kind they printed in the issues of *Life* magazine that he had picked up a couple of times—and then, as if someone had thrown a switch, things began to move. The top limbs of the tree soughed gently in the near-still breeze; some of the powder drifted off and fell lazily, like the snow in one of those snow globes imported from Europe that you shook upside down. Off behind the barn, a cow mooed sleepily. The door to the house slammed open and then shut. It seemed to spit a hooting figure out onto the porch, bearing something nearly too heavy for it to carry.

"Jeff! Jeff!" the figure whooped, and as it came closer, Jeff saw that its burden was a long wooden toboggan. The figure was his brother Tom. He was dressed in heavy boots and a bright-colored knitted muffler and a buff-colored coat that was too big for him. There was a smile a mile wide on his face. He suddenly threw the sled down and grabbed Jeff.

There were tears in Jeff's eyes. He looked at him- self and discovered he was dressed in heavy mittens and hand-me-down boots, and, his brother, who had not been alive to him since 1861—his brother, who was a hundred and twenty years dead, speared through the heart by a Confederate bayonet—was standing before him, shouting into his face and grinning as if it were yesterday. He knew this day; he knew something momentous had happened on this day, but he did not remember what. And as he remembered these things, he found that he was more six years old than long-dead, and that he was grinning back at twelve-year-old Tom and nodding at everything he said, worshiping him as always.

"I can't *believe* Pa let us outa the rest of our chores," Tom said. "What are you standing there for? If we don't go now, he'll change his

mind!"

Tom picked up the toboggan, grunting, and heaved it onto his back; and then Jeff was trotting along, half beside and half behind him, holding an edge and at least pretending that he was helping. They passed the white-coated carousel, dead for the winter, its horses wearing snow caps, and in a few minutes they had left the farm behind and were making the long, slow climb up the shallow hill, way off at the far edge of their land, that led to the real hill where sledding was done. Before long they were both puffing heavily, and they stopped, dropping the toboggan on the ground, where it made fine cracks in the crusty top layer of snow. They looked back at their father's house and, before them, the town of Montvale. Then they looked at their own breath-and the smoke that it made in the air.

"Pa said I could order those stamps from New York next month," Tom said. Jeff smiled, not really knowing what stamps were except that they were little square things that Tom pasted, using little tongs, in a book. He wanted some himself and knew that he would have them when he started getting an allowance too. Right now he got a penny every now and then from Tom, sometimes two pennies from Pa when they went into town to the general store with its candy jars. He never had such fine days as those. Except maybe for this one.

Tom said, "Can't wait for those stamps," and there was a dreamy look to him, and then they hauled the sled up again and continued on their way.

It wasn't long before they reached the sledding hill, high and curved like a C around the churchyard. There was a rickety fence separating the sledding track from the cemetery. The same fence failed to separate the boys from the cemetery in October around Halloween or sometimes when the older boys drank in the summer and made dares on one another. Now the old chipped fence posts stood up like long teeth, crooked and sharp at the end, and you had to be careful you didn't bash into them because one of the teeth might come down on you, or even give way and send you right into a headstone.

There was a group already making use of the track, taking turns one after another like a neat, segmented snake, and Jeff saw a couple of tar torches already lit at the top and bottom of the hill so that the sledding could go on after dark. Laughter, swirling and then borne away by the strengthening wind, reached them, and suddenly they were at the top.

" 'Lo, Tom, Jeff," said Petey Graham, who was making a bench of his sled off to the side of the starting patch. It looked like he was carving something; as far as Jeff could remember, he had never seen Petey Graham go down the sled track once the whole winter.

"Hi, Pete," Tom answered for both of them. Jeff knew that Petey was someone they were not supposed to spend much time with; he was said to be slow-witted. They passed him, lugging the sled another twenty feet to where a small group of five or six sat huddled around a pile of sticks. In the darkening afternoon Jeff recognized one or two of the faces turned his way: the parson's boy; John Major and his brother Henry; the mayor's daughter Melissa. As they drew closer, the others turned as well. William Gantry, Tom's best friend, was there, as were the Becker sisters and the blacksmith's apprentice, Pod Williamson.

There were greetings all around, and Jeff found himself seated on the end of the toboggan while they waited for the fire to be brought to life. He could not understand why they were bothering with this now, since there was still a good hour of daylight left. He thought of asking Tom about this, but he saw that Tom was busy with Melissa Poundridge, seating her on the toboggan, showing her how to make some sort of knot. Jeff was nearly crowded off the end of the sled, and almost said something, but he thought better of it; when Tom was in this mood, there was little he wanted to hear about anything. Now Jeff was getting cold. But then Bill Gantry had set a spark going with his flint and the small fire was sputtering to flame.

Jeff wanted to get to the sledding part, but he knew he had to wait for Tom. He had to wait for Tom for everything, but that never bothered him because Tom was his brother and always looked out for him. Tom had fought for him many times when the odds were unfair; one time he had thrashed Henry Major when that boy, three years older than Jeff, had taken one of his licorice whips right on the street in front of the general store just after Jeff had bought it. Henry had begun to strut away when suddenly Torn came out of nowhere, threw him to the ground and pounded the tar out of him—and retrieved the candy, whole and clean. Tom had taken a licking himself for that one when the rest of the Major clan—John and his older brother Jim—had ganged up on him in the schoolyard, but he had never said a word about it. A word never had to be said.

Finally they were going to sled. This happened only after Melissa Poundridge and the other girls decided there was something they had to do off by themselves for a while. The sky was turning blue-black by then, and when Tom said for him to get on the toboggan behind him and hold tight, he did so with a yell and they were off almost before he was seated. The icy snow glared bluish as it rushed past, and they came close to the fence once. But almost before he knew what had happened, they were at the bottom of the hill, flying past the lit torches and coming to an abrupt stop at the raised mound of snow another twenty feet on.

"Wheeee!" Jeff said, and he thought he had never been happier in

his life when Tom turned around and said "Wheeee!" too. They turned the sled sideways and then Tom got it up on his back, this time gently pushing Jeff away when he tried to hold on. "Let me do it, pal," he said, and when they got to the top, Jeff saw that Melissa was waiting for them.

There followed another boring time on the sled in front of the modest fire, and Jeff grew impatient.

"Can't we go again, Tom?" he asked, and when he got no definitive answer, he asked, "Can I go by myself, then?"

Tom turned around and stared at him.

"No," he said. There was a look on his face that Jeff didn't like, and Jeff liked it even less when Tom turned his back on him to face Melissa again. He sat still for a few minutes, trying hard to interest himself in John Major's story about how he had pulled Bessy McAllister's pigtail in class that morning, then turned back to his primer before Mr. Glass could react, thereby getting away with it; and then Jeff asked Tom again:

"Why can't I go by myself?"

Tom tried to ignore him, but Melissa said in a petulant voice, "Why don't you let him, Tom? Get him out of here."

Suddenly Tom turned toward him. "All right, little kid," he said. Jeff never liked it when he was called "little kid."

"Go on down, but hold on tight."

Instantly Jeff was up, laying his hands on the toboggan. And instantly he regretted what he had asked for. Torn, he saw, had turned back to the girl, but Bill Gantry was eyeing him in a way that he disliked. He saw Bill nudge Tom, asking him something, but Torn shrugged him off. Because Jeff couldn't lift the sled the way Tom had, he had to pull it by the rope attached to the front. The sled was long, and even then he had trouble in hauling it in his wake. He turned around to see Bill Gantry get up, but at that moment Melissa said, "Aw, let him go on himself," and Bill sat down again. John and Henry Major turned their turtle eyes on him, grinning stupidly in the firelight, and then turned back to their friends. Jeff was suddenly alone.

Resolutely he pulled the toboggan forward. Before he knew it, he was at the top of the course. The sky was black now; he could see the first faint points of the evening stars. There would be a moon later, but now the only light he had to guide him came from the two flickering torches to either side of the starting point and, far below, the two tiny spots of orange that marked the other torches. In the dimness he could make out the blue-white track of snow he was to follow. It seemed much steeper and more treacherous than it had before. He shivered. He turned to look back at the warm fire, to listen

to the laughing voices behind him, and knew that it was too late to retreat.

As if to fire his resolve, he heard Henry Major call out, "What's the matter—you scared?" and the rippling, if not unanimous, chorus of laughter that followed tightened him. For all he knew, his brother, along with this girl he seemed so mysteriously interested in, was laughing at him too. And that would be too much to bear.

He straightened the sled in the track and sat down on it. He realized how empty it was without a second rider. He had never even ridden in the front before. Without the extra weight of his brother, he feared he might take off like some huge bird, to crash somewhere in the unknown distance below. His boots fit snugly under the front curve of the toboggan. As he sat waiting for a push that would never come, tears filled his eyes and he began to shiver.

He wanted to cry out for Tom to come and help him like he always had, but he knew it would not happen this time. An invisible space had opened up between them, between him and his childhood. He felt trapped. He heard another snort of rude laughter, muffled, behind him. He imagined the Major boys snickering at him again. Why didn't Tom stand up to them this time? He felt that space widen even more. He had feared the time might come when Tom was not there to fight his big battles for him, and this was it. Though he understood, he could not help hating Tom for it. Why did this have to happen? Why did Tom have to abandon him now?

"Jeff?" someone called, and for a moment his heart leaped at the thought that his brother had come out of the dark to save him once more. Sitting on the sled, he turned, half-smiling. It was not Tom, but Petey Graham, the half-wit. He loomed out of the twilight like a giant, his huge gawking frame forming a shadow in front of the flickering firelight behind him.

"Need help, Jeff?" he asked sincerely. He still held his carving tools and a formless piece of wood he was trying to turn into something that had a shape.

"No thanks, Petey."

"You sure? I heard them Major boys laughing, thought they might have dared you into something you didn't want to do."

Jeff choked back tears, suddenly hating his brother more than he ever thought he could.

"No, Petey, that's okay."

And then the sled seemed to move by itself, though it was his own hands that propelled it away from the lurking specter of Petey Graham and down the hill. He felt a momentary exhilaration as the first steep drop came. His stomach bottomed out as the sled picked up speed. The voices above faded, leaving him now with only darkness, and cold

wind whip-ping his face. The sled moved swiftly and expertly along the well-worn path, and the target torches at the bottom already seemed bigger. For a supreme moment Jeff felt in control of all that was happening. He felt grown up.

But that moment passed. The toboggan was moving with purpose now. Jeff realized with a flash of panic that he didn't know how to steer it. Torn had always handled that part, had never really explained it to him, and here, about halfway down, when the second steep drop occurred, there came a point when the rider had to assume control of the sled. That point came, and Jeff didn't know what to do. He was moving too fast. Finally he threw out his feet to try to slow himself, but he only upset the movement of the sled and tore off one of his boots. Though the sled steadied, he knew that he was at the mercy of the toboggan and the snow and the night.

He had never moved so fast. He could not see the torches at the bottom—and then he did see them, somewhere off to the right where they shouldn't be. He shouted, and something solid and black came up very fast, a chain of mountains it seemed, until he realized it was the half-broken fence around the churchyard. There was a momentary slackening in his speed and a thump as something ran under the sled. There was no time to think of this because he was accelerating again.

He thought he heard sounds above him, calls and shouts, but he couldn't be sure. He heard no laughter. Large blocks of night were moving past him—gravestones. He threw out his booted foot wildly, trying to stop his progress, and his knee abruptly buckled under him, throwing his chin into the front of the toboggan. He nearly lost consciousness. Still he did not slow down. Then before him he saw the twin lights at the bottom of the path, and a wild hope sprang up in him that all was miraculously well, that he had somehow come through the cemetery and regained the path. But this was not so. Once again he saw the fence—long, tapered fangs of wood—rushing at him until something intervened: a huge mountain of formed stone, large and curved, with a looming cross on top of it. The toboggan hit it, and his last agonized, hate-filled word before he flew off the sled to slam into this object was "*Tom!*"

He awoke in mud. There was mud in his mouth; he seemed awash in wet blackness.

He turned over. The sky was slate-colored and low, so overcast that it looked as though it touched the earth. There was rain, too, a solid, unending fall of water that made him want to turn over again and bury his face in the mud.

His mind cleared a little. There was shouting all around him, and screaming. "Tom?" he called, and in answer someone to his left gave a

groan. He turned his face in that direction and saw a human form, certainly not his brother Tom, trying to turn toward him. The prone figure seemed made of mud, with a heavy, mud-colored overcoat and something in one hand, a long stick it looked like, also mud-colored. It was a rifle. The man holding it groaned once more.

There came excited shouting near him, and Jeff managed to raise his eyes out of the mud to see a dim line of men running his way. He saw that they were wearing gray overcoats and had bayonets lowered. Behind him, he heard more cries, though they were farther away and less enthusiastic. The running men were nearly upon him when the groaning man to his left gave a loud shout and suddenly rose to his feet. He was delirious. His rifle was still in the mud. He held his hands out and shouted "Captain! Captain!" Jeff saw now that the man had a beard, cropped close to his face, despite that, he could not have been more than nineteen or twenty. Though he was a soldier of his own army, Jeff did not know him. He must have wandered in from another regiment.

Then the graycoats were upon them, and as the groaning soldier lurched forward, he gave a sudden scream and was driven back and down into the mud by a bayonet held by a Confederate with a half-wild look on his face. The rebel's mouth was open, and to Jeff he looked half-man, half-fish, gulping wildly at the air as if it held water that he needed for sustenance. The downed man's screams seemed to waken him, and he suddenly looked very frightened, trying desperately to remove his bayonet from the struggling figure; his fellows were streaming by him, yelling curses and encouragement. Finally, in a panic, the gray-clad soldier put his foot on the screaming man as if he were a clod of earth and pulled his rifle free. The man sank back into the mud, twitched, and then lay inert as the Confederate moved on.

Jeff kept still as death, with his face toward the bayoneted soldier, his teeth clenched to keep from crying out. He felt a heavy boot on his ankle and wanted to yell at the pain. The boot moved on, grinding into the skin below his heavy trouser, but he managed to keep quiet.

After a time, all the cries and other sounds receded. Jeff screwed up his courage and turned his head toward the battle. There was a fog of rain and smoke back there, with vague forms moving in and out of it. Besides that, there was nothing but mud and gray sky. He looked the other way and saw no reinforcements or laggers, so he rose up on his elbows and knees and crawled over to the bearded soldier.

“You hear me?" he whispered, moving down close to the man's ear. He turned the man's face toward him, away from the mud. The eyes were glassy and half-closed. Remembering what he had seen others do, he reached down to the man's neck and felt for a pulse, but

there was none. As his hand moved away, it felt something slick and wet, not like mud, and he had to hold himself from vomiting when he saw that the Confederate soldier's bayonet, in being tom loose, had ripped the front of the man's chest almost to his shoulder blades. Most of what had been in his chest lay out on the ground or covered the front of his uniform.

Jeff must have fainted, for when he awoke, the sounds of battle were gone and it was night. Rain was still falling. He tried to stand but could not; his lower leg, where he had been trod on, was sore and swollen and ached terribly. He heard a sound close by and tried once more to rise but fell back down heavily and lost consciousness again.

He was awakened by the strike of something flat and heavy against his ribs. He grunted and rolled over, blinking at bright sunshine and the even brighter blue of the sky overhead. A shape was partially blocking that light, and he soon focused on it, pulling himself up into a sitting position. The figure was gray-clad, and his heart sank.

"Get on up, Yankee boy," the soldier said, prodding him hard with the butt end of his rifle. When Jeff made a tentative move, his swollen leg collapsed and he fell back down. The soldier butted him harder, in the same spot.

"I said get up, boy."

"I think my leg's broken," he told the soldier, trying to sound reasonable.

"Bull-drop it is. Get up." Again the flat of the rifle rammed into the same sore spot.

Not realizing what he was doing, Jeff rose with a shout and grappled with the rebel. The graycoat gave a bawl of surprise and fell back in the drying mud. They wrestled as if they were in a farmyard pen back home. To his surprise, Jeff easily mastered his adversary, taking his gun and throwing it off to one side. He had planted two solid jabs on the other's jaw and drawn his fist back again when he was hit solidly on the head from behind and went down.

He awoke this time to find two soldiers standing over him: the one he had beaten to the ground and another who had apparently been doing sweep-up with him. He felt soreness not only in his leg and on the back of his head, but in his ribs and farther down his back, around his kidneys. They had obviously worked him over after he blacked out. When he put his arm to his head, another kick landed on his back, and he rolled over with a loud exclamation.

"Seems we got us something real special here," one soldier said to the other.

"Get up," the one who had originally found him said in a harsh tone.

Jeff pulled his legs under him and sat up, waiting for further blows

and half covering his head.

"Sure hope you're a reb, boy," the second soldier said.

"He don't look like no reb," the other said. And then he laughed hoarsely. "Get th' hell to your feet."

Jeff got up, an ache at a time, and then he discovered that his uniform was gone. He was clad only in his long johns.

"Put your clothes back on," one of the two rebels said. Jeff got his first good look at him. He was no more than sixteen, without a trace of chin hair. He had mean, hard eyes. The other looked ten years older but had the same grit-filled look about him. The younger, smaller one indicated a pile of civilian clothes on the ground at Jeff's feet.

"Where's my uniform?" Jeff asked.

"Them's your clothes; put 'em on," the older one said.

"Give me my uniform," Jeff said, trying to demand but knowing how weak his voice really was.

The older Confederate shook his head and grunted. "Sure hope for his sake he ain't no spy," he laughed, and then the other one stepped forward, and soon Jeff was on the ground again.

When he rose to consciousness, it was nighttime and he was in the back of an open wagon. The moon was up and almost full. There was stationary torchlight off to his right, which meant the wagon was standing still. He sat up, putting his hands on his knees, and discovered that he had been dressed in the civilian clothes: an overlarge jacket and vest, and too-short pants, no shoes and unmatched socks. The pants itched him, but this was the least of his worries. When he tried to lower himself from the wagon, he saw that it was being guarded by two soldiers who, with glaring looks, made sure he stayed where he was.

"Bring him here, Sergeant," he heard a voice say in the darkness. In another moment he was half-carried, half-walked toward what looked to be, in the moon and torchlight, an officer.

The officer addressed him. "Can you stand on your own?" With a leap of hope, Jeff noted that the man's voice was not without kindness.

Jeff nodded; but when the sergeant and his escort released him, he promptly sank to the ground. A camp stool was brought for him, and he was made to sit on it. Someone gave him a tin cup filled with coffee.

The officer let him drink for a moment and then spoke. "I'm sure you're aware of the predicament I'm in—" he began, but Jeff cut him off.

"I am Jeffrey Scott, Third Union Army, Fourteenth Infantry. My uniform was forcibly stripped from me by two of your men. I was put in these clothes against my will." He looked as steadily as he could at

the officer. "I am not a spy."

The officer tapped the fingers of one hand against the back of the other and regarded Jeff soberly.

"I probably shouldn't say this," he said. He paused, clasped his hands behind his back. "In fact, I know I shouldn't. If I chose, I could have you tried right now, even in the condition you're in; could have you shot in the morning. But I know those boys of mine who brought you in, and I know they're lying. Your clothes don't fit. You're a Union man, all right, but you're no spy. Why in hell would a spy, dressed in civilian clothes, be out in the middle of that battlefield?" He stopped, turned his back on Jeff. "I don't like the North. I don't like what it's done to this country or the way it's running this war. My job is not to like Union soldiers." His hands gripped one another tightly. But I don't like what's been done to you. It's just not . . . right. I've got people up North, family; always have had." He turned around, and Jeff saw how angry he was. "And dammit. I can't stand not to act like a *gentleman*!" He moved closer. "This is what I've done. I've sent an envoy to your people, asking for an exchange of prisoners. I want two of my soldiers for their one captured spy. If they respond, I'll send you back. Otherwise—"

"What about the two men who did this to me?"

The officer furrowed his brow. "I've got a whole company to worry about. I think you know what would happen if I dressed them down for bringing in a Union man."

Before Jeff could respond, the officer turned away. "That's the best I can do."

It was cold that night. No one offered him a blanket, though they did let him edge close to the meager fire that burned near the wagon. An eerie silence had descended over what had been a day before, one of the bloodiest battlefields of the war.

Groups of men huddled outside their tents and in front of their fires and joked or swapped boasts about women or their battle prowess. Jeff could hear the same activity in the Union camp across the field. Occasionally, when the wind was right, the strains of a lonely harmonica reached his ears. Someone gave him another cup of coffee, but no one offered to engage him in conversation.

Just before dawn he managed to stretch out in the back of the wagon and fall asleep. But almost immediately he was awakened by a sergeant with long moustaches and tired eyes. The sergeant looked at him coolly for a few moments and then spat deliberately on the ground.

"Seems them bastards across the way want nothing to do with you." he said.

Jeff was stunned. "I can't believe that."

"Say they know nothing about no spy. They even deny they know anybody by the name of Jeff Scott." Behind the sergeant, Jeff saw the first tint of morning, giving the man a faint orange silhouette in the chill air. The sergeant spat again and wiped a bit of spittle from his untrimmed upper lip.

“Captain seems to think they just can't be bothered since you was found without your uniform on."

Jeff's pulse began to race. "Can they do that?"

The sergeant shrugged. "Union Army, friend."

"Oh, God."

"Yep," the sergeant said in a drawn-out way. "Seems we got to shoot us a spy this morning." He spat yet again and added, "Unless of course he was to get away."

Jeff lifted his head, seeing the slight, ironic smile on the man's face.

"I don't like them two boys brought you in," he said. "Me and the captain had a talk and we decided you ought to escape. Might mean I'll take a day in the stockade. But I think I can see to it that those two boys take the blame for me."

"You'll do that?"

The sergeant put up a restraining hand. "Hold on now, sonny. It ain't all peaches. You may even get shot on the way back over there. Then again, if you make it, you'll have to spend the rest of this war with them Union bastards." He spat again, wiped a sleeve across his mouth. He snorted. You see, there's a war, and then there's the right thing. Sometimes the two don't mix. But sometimes they do. We don't have no blue-boy uniform to put on you so you'll have to take your chances." He stepped closer, and Jeff could smell tobacco juice. "And I got to tell you that if this battle heats up later today and I meet you out on that slab of mud, there's nothing on God's bastard earth that'll make me hesitate before putting a ball of lead in your heart. You hear me?"

Jeff nodded. Almost before he knew it, the sergeant had him down off the wagon and out on the battlefield. He was given a thirty-yard lead, and then the sergeant sent up an alarm. Soon there were shouts and a few tentative rifle shots over his head. He ducked low and crawled on his belly toward the Union lines, which were farther away than he had thought. He moved quickly, with intermittent shots still ringing over him. Twice he hit an obstruction that proved to be a dead, rigor mortised body. Once he almost moved straight into a bayonet-tipped rifle lodged at an angle in the now-hard mud and just missed losing an eye to it. After a while, the shots behind him faded and he was able to rise.

He found himself eye-to-eye with a blue-clad figure, someone he

vaguely knew from his own regiment. Before he could open his mouth, the man had raised his rifle. There was a sudden burning pain in his thigh where the bullet found its mark. Then he was on the ground, looking at the growing blue-red light of day dawning as the soldier whooped, "I shot a reb! I shot him!"

I'm going to die, Jeff thought.

A hatred as he had never known, a hatred mixed with the solid fear of death, especially of this unjust death, filled every pore of his body. He screamed, clutching at the dawning day with his fingers, trying to hold it. He could taste the hate and the fear. The blue sky began to pull away, and there was blackness behind it—stark, rock-solid blackness that was curling down around him—and there was someone very close, just behind or in front of him, sucking voraciously at the fear and hatred, and turning to ask him

But in an instant it was all gone, the blue sky back and the hate and fear diminished. The boy who had shot him was crying, "My God, it's Jeffrey Scott," and someone else, interrupting in a calm, hard voice, said, "He'll be all right, he'll live. . . ."

Yes, he exulted, his mind bursting with joy, and the fear and the hate bled out of him. *I'll live!*

But then he was on the scaffold in Montvale, and Mayor Poundridge was staring up at him calmly, and the ground gave way, and that horrible bursting pressure came into his chest and head and eyes, and then everything exploded, and the hatred returned, along with the fear, only this time it didn't go away. It got worse instead. *I'm dying!* he thought, and the hatred filled him as it had on that battlefield, but now it spilled over and exploded along with his head and eyes and lungs. Even as the last molecule of air was wrenched from his chest by his screaming blood, as his red corpuscles cried desperately for more air and found none, his body, his blood, *all of him*, screamed hate. His eyes, burning like coals in their aching sockets, looked out at them—those he had grown up with, played with, fought with—and wanted to see them *dead*. All of them. They were responsible; and even more than the continuation of his own life, he wanted their lives ended. The mayor, the sheriff, the Major boys, Melissa Poundridge (who had promised herself to his brother Tom and then, when Tom went off to fight, hooked into and married Tom's best friend, Bill Gantry, whose rich father had bought his son's way out of the war), all of them.

Death! he screamed, using not his lungs because there was nothing in his lungs to make the word with, but his soul. *Death!* he screamed, and their astonished faces must have thought he was speaking of his own, though he meant theirs. The death of Montvale was what he beseeched—and then the fear and hatred consumed and ate him up,

and the sky turned black, the world was pulled away like elastic and the black dropped down around him, and that voice, that voice, was once more beside him, breathing into his mouth, fanning the flames of hate and fear and at the same time sucking them out of him, saying "Yes" to his prayer of death, the mouth of this thing on his mouth

Jeff Scott heard laughter, and he looked up from the floor of his trailer to see Ash's shape looming over him. Ash was in the trailer with him, but he also seemed to be everywhere else, occupying the whole frame of Jeff's mind as well as his vision. For a moment it seemed that Ash's face was pressed to his, that fishlike, slit red mouth on his own, but this was only a memory, and then he looked up and saw Ash's shape, distinct and man-sized now, turn from him and walk to the door of the trailer.

"I'll be back for you soon," Ash said, still chuckling, and the door to the trailer opened, not quite banging shut before Ash continued, "You'll be ready." And Jeff Scott, in despair, knew it was true.

TWELVE

It was going to happen again.

Frances knew that now, knew it so deep in her bones that her body quaked with the knowledge. The barber pole was just a barber pole now; not the Northern Star, the red and white of His passion and pain, His protecting veil over her. There was only the open Book before her, open to the last page of the last chapter, where the screaming things of judgment were—the screaming red things that would not go away and would only die and die.

Would this finally be the last time *he* made her witness?

Other times came to her: a long, white, empty boat, the sound of booming gun blasts fading over the long water and a spreading red-ink stain over the bow and stern, spreading to meet the horizon. . . . A high tower, the misleading pop of rifle shots, a mother trying to fall protectively over her baby carriage and then falling down to the concrete: another rifle crack and then another. . . . A lick of night flame creeping up the side of a tent and whipping around the base and rising up with a sonic boom to form a ball of hell that grew and grew, engulfing everything, the animals, the circus, the spectators.

Him I mourn. . . .

Where was Jeb now? Where had he been then? She wanted him to be here, to tell her it was all right, that Ash would not come back, that what they had done was not wrong, that it would happen no more, that those faces in the flames, those horrible, surprised faces, would not stare at her anymore.

It's going to happen again.

"Frances?"

"Jeb?"

The voice came soft and soothing, like Jeb's voice when he was kind, when she was sick that time with the measles, when he came and covered her with a blanket and then made the doctor come out to their place against his will, the doctor who *cringed* when he entered the house, looking at the paintings on the walls, trying to make small talk as he bent over her, his hands trembling as he examined her, waiting for perhaps the hammer blow on his head or worse, wanting only to leave, to leave even his bag and run back to town, to be away from them. She was sure it must be Jeb's voice.

"Frances?"

She knew it was Ash before she turned around. He could make his voice soft if he wanted to, could do anything with it that he wanted: make it sound like animals, like a train whistle at night, a cricket, a mouse, the sigh of chilly wind, like a roaring ball of fire.

"What do you want?"

"It's time, Frances.–

His voice was not as soft now. It would change, soon, to something as long and white as a knife, and as hungry.

It will happen again.

"What do you want?" she repeated.

"You know what I want," he answered. His voice still soothed. "This will be better than the first time. Do you remember the first time, Frances?"

"I don't—" she began, but she remembered, and then Ash was gone and she didn't remember. She was in a white place. At first she thought it was heaven, the heaven that Jeb had sometimes talked about with fear and longing on his face. He always made sure she went to church. He insisted she go, even walking with her as far as the dirt path that led up to the steps of the clapboard chapel. He never went in himself. She would sometimes sit by one of the stained windows with a little clear glass at the bottom and look out at him, standing straight against the oak tree by the front gate. He stood tall, and his head was thrown back. In a strange, cold way, he seemed to be praying. She asked him once, on one of those Sunday mornings that always smelled like Sunday, with sharp, wooden-bench smells in the air, along with coffee and flowers in the spring, or in the winter with a cold clean smell, and he looked at her and told her about heaven.

"Go to church when I tell you, read His Book, and go to heaven when it's time," he said. "*Love only life.*" He would say no more. It was Jeb who had given her her Bible, and he took it from her now, showing her the passages he wanted her to know, the ones he had outlined with a shaking pencil, the ones he had made her say over and over until she had memorized them:

I am the resurrection, and the life: he that believeth in me, though he were dead, yet shall he live: and whosoever liveth and believeth in me shall never die.

And also:

. . . by his death he could take away all the power of he who had power over death, and set free all those who had been held in slavery all their lives by the fear of death.

That day he locked himself in the barn and painted, and just before sunset she heard him yelling and breaking things, his voice rising to a horrid screech like a dog's yowling. There was a huge, tearing crash followed by silence. She tried to open the barn door, and then his voice came clear and icy, more icy than ever before.

"Come in and I'll kill you," he said. He stayed in the barn for two days. When he came out, she did not go near him for nearly a week.

But the white place she was in now was not heaven. It was quite

like heaven might be, but when she looked close, she saw that even this was an illusion. The walls were dirty. At one time, after they had just been painted, they must have been very white, but now there were streaks on them, smudges and tiny red dots.

She was not alone. Around her there were others dressed in white, sitting up in bed and staring at the ceiling or walls or doing things with their hands. Some picked at imaginary bits of dust. One young girl was hitting herself on the leg repeatedly, in the same spot, in rhythm: another was trying to tear out her hair but could not reach her head because her hands were tied to the sides of the bed. There were flies everywhere. A dirty screen window was ajar, leaning against the bars that formed the real window. There was a door at one end of the room, white, with a lot of stains on it and a small glass porthole.

"We were going to kill you," a chilling voice said from Frances' left. The face was young, fifteen, perhaps sixteen, with blonde hair pulled straight back and knotted, giving the head a skeletal appearance; the face was thin and emaciated. The eyes were gray-blue steel, the gaze the most direct Frances had ever seen.

The lips pulled away from the girl's teeth, showing a crooked bite and a few gaps. They looked as shark-like as if they had been two level rows of razors.

"We were going to climb on you while you were asleep and rip the flesh from your body with our mouths. We weren't going to use our hands." The girl tried to gesture, but her hands were bound loosely to her sides with straps, giving her only a few inches of movement. Her nails were bitten almost to the cuticles. "All of us here, every one. We would have gulped your blood through our teeth and then spit it out." Her razor-thin lips pulled back even farther. "We would have done it, too," the girl continued, "only the doctor told us not to. He wants you himself." Then she turned her head away, snapping it downward, trying to gnaw at her left hand, barely reaching the fingers to rip at a small bit of skin.

What am I doing here? Frances thought. And then, in a panic, she realized that she didn't remember anything about herself.

When she tried to move, she discovered that she, too, was bound to her bed. She could move her hands and arms, but the lower part of her body was securely fastened.

The girl in the bed next to hers was once again smiling at her from her serpent-like head.

"Please let me out!" Frances shouted, hoping that someone might hear her through the door and open it. Instead, there was instant silence in the room. Every face turned toward her. "*Please!*" she yelled again. "Please let me out!"

The blonde girl began to laugh. Her voice started as a low, dry tick, quickly working up to a lurid squeal. The others in the room followed her, and soon the entire ward was filled with rabid laughter.

A face appeared at the porthole in the door and then retreated. Abruptly the door was pushed open and two men came in, scared, pinched looks on their faces. Behind them was another man, hard-looking, and he had a hose in his hands. He held it loosely draped across one arm with the nozzle in one hand. When Frances saw the hose, the nozzle, something opened in her mind and she remembered who she was; there was something horrible about a hose. . . .

The two attendants walked briskly up one side of the room and down the other, holding up their hands for silence. The noise only increased. One of the men motioned to the third, who brought the hose into the room and made a signal behind him, out into the hallway. The hose hissed and swelled and then the nozzle came to life, sending out a hard spray of water. The man expertly swiveled it back and forth. Some were hit in the chest, some in the face. The flood of water knocked Frances back against her pillow, and for a moment it filled her mouth and she was unable to breathe, or even to see. She gagged, and when she was about to lose consciousness, the stream turned to the next bed. She was left gasping and drenched. When the man with the hose finished, he left the room and the other two followed close behind him.

Before long Frances was shivering in her bed, unable to move. Everything was soaking wet: the bed, the pillows, her nightgown and the sheets. She waited for something to happen, but nothing did. The others around her were stunned into silence, most of them turned on their sides, pulled into balls, hands around their knees to retain warmth. The screen had been knocked aside, and swarms of bugs were finding their way into the room. It was late afternoon now, and a cool breeze drifted in, only adding to the dampness.

Frances tried to curl up like the others. She could not stop shaking; her teeth were rattling, and the sheets felt like lead upon her body. The shadows on the side of the window lengthened as the sun began to set.

There was a commotion outside the door. An argument was going on in the hallway; someone was yelling loudly, and someone else was answering in a gruff, low voice. “Don't believe . . ." a voice shouted, and then the door swung open.

Someone flicked a light switch, and a long neon light that stretched the length of the room flickered into life. "Holy Christ!" the loud voice said, and there were tramping footsteps into the room. You think this is a goddamn zoo?" The other voice, the gruff one, said, "No," and then the first voice said, after a pause. "Which bed is she

in?" The other voice mumbled something.

Frances saw that they were approaching her bed. She tried to close her eyes, but the presence of the two men standing over her was too strong and she opened them. She caught a glimpse of the man with the strong voice just as he was turning away from her. His features were as solid as his voice; his face was full and squarish with a broad nose, and he had a head of thick, graying hair. His eyes were powerful and slate-gray.

"Good God Almighty!" the man screamed at his companion. He raised his hand as if to strike him, and then lowered it, regaining his composure. "I should fire you for this. Get new linen for everyone—I don't care if you have a coffee break or go off in half an hour or whatever in hell," he said, cutting off a complaint the other man began. "Just do it or you're out."

The orderly turned away, and the man with the gray eyes bent over Frances. She looked up into his face. He was startled for a moment, but then his face suddenly expanded into a warm smile.

"I see you're with us now."

She shivered in answer.

"I know you're cold. We'll take care of that. When did you wake up?"

Mutely, she continued to stare up at him.

"If you can speak to me, I can get you out of this ward."

In shivery breaths, she said, "I can talk."

"Don't worry," he said. His eyes held what looked like kindness, which she hadn't seen in a long time. "We'll take care of you. You really shouldn't be in here, but there was nowhere else to put you." He looked around at the other girls in the ward; they were beginning to come out of their stupor; some were staring at Frances and the doctor; others were involved in their own pursuits, trying their bonds. The girl who had been hitting her leg resumed her monotonous activity.

The doctor said wryly, "This is a state hospital. Since you were in a coma, there didn't seem to be anything else to do with you." And then his face grew solemn. "Do you know how long you've been here?"

Frances stared at him, unblinking.

"You're nineteen years old. You've been in this bed for four years."

Frances shivered, looking up at him steadily. "Do you have the Book?" she said suddenly.

His eyebrows frowned, but he kept the warm smile.

"I don't understand."

"Jeb told me to always read it."

Dawning comprehension came into the doctor's eyes. He looked up at the doorway, where the orderly, along with two women from the laundry, were entering with a cart. He motioned them over to Frances'

bed.

He said to her, "We'll see what we can do about getting you a Bible. And into another room. We have some talking to do, Frances."

Frances nodded as the doctor stood up.

The girl with the piercing blue eyes in the bed next to hers sat bolt upright and began to scream.

"Fuck her! Then let us eat her flesh! Fuck her! Fuck her now!"

The doctor talked in a low voice to the orderly, who left the room and returned a moment later with a tray. The whole ward began to scream again. Some of the girls lashed their bodies back and forth against their bonds; the girl who was pounding her leg continued to do so, each hard, dull whack audible as her body swayed, her mouth open to emit a continuous, unthinking shriek.

"Fuck her! Fuck her!"

The orderly began to administer shots, starting with the bed by the door. When he came to Frances, he looked at the doctor, who seemed to consider for a moment and then nodded. Frances felt a jab in her cold, wet arm. The screams and other noises, the pounding of the girl's clenched fist on her leg, began to fade. She heard one last tearing cry from the girl in the bed next to hers before she heard nothing. . . .

She was in another white room, this one whiter than the other. Was *this* heaven? She remembered speaking of the Book to the doctor. Perhaps that speaking, her last act, had been enough to redeem her abomination in His eyes. Perhaps this was finally redemption. This whiteness was pure, unblemished—but then she saw that there were corners where the white met, forming walls and a ceiling.

She pushed herself up in the bed. There was a window in this room, with bars set into it, and a real screen securely fastened on it. There was a moth on the screen. Slowly it lifted its wings and then quickly let them fall. She was alone. The bed was white; the door was white with silver hinges, a regular door, without a porthole in it. But there was no knob on it. She was warm, dressed in a new linen, a starched white robe fastened at the top and back with white cloth strips. The bed was warm and dry, too. Through the window she could just make out the top of an oak; its leaves had started to turn. She heard bird sounds outside, sounds as though the birds were making ready for winter.

There was a small table with a smooth wooden top next to the bed. There was a white lamp on it. Next to the lamp was a book.

It was the Book. Carefully she lifted it and brought it to her lap. It was heavy, and she almost dropped it. The black, rough-grained cover felt thick in her fingers. She pulled at it, and saw a marker opening to:

I am the resurrection, and the life; he that believeth in me, though he

were dead, yet shall he live; and whosoever liveth and believeth in me shall never die.

A fierce trembling began in her body. It was a trembling of mingled fear and joy, for these were the words that had suckled her, had held up for her the only hope for her salvation. These were the words by which she knew that He watched over her. Without these words, she was lost. A sob escaped her throat. She dropped the Book into her lap, holding her hands up to the ceiling and closing her eyes, letting rapture enshroud her. There *was* redemption possible; He would bring it to her. He would shield her—

"Frances?"

The door to the room opened and then closed again. Someone stood there motionless. Frances felt a surge of fear and then one of joy—maybe this was heaven after all, and He had heard her heart, had come to her Himself.

"Frances, my name is Doctor Payton."

It was not Him. And this was not heaven. But at least it was not the *other* come to her, he whom she sought to push away. At least it was not he who had the power over her.

"Frances, are you all right?"

The doctor approached her bed. His shoes had rubber soles that made a slight squeaking noise as he walked. His face, now furrowed as he bent over her, was as kind as it had been when he talked to her in the other white room; his body gave off warmth.

"What's wrong, Frances?" He felt her forehead, took her limp hand, held it.

She said, "I . . . nothing."

There was something about him that calmed her, something about the assurance he had given her that made her feel he might have been sent—maybe by Him!—to save her. He had taken her from that ward of madwomen, put her in this room by herself. He would heal her, make her whole again, and cleanse the memory of the other from her.

"Are you sure nothing's wrong?" he asked. "Should I send for something to help you sleep?"

"I'm all right."

He looked at her sternly, and then smiled. Despite herself, Frances smiled too.

"That's better," the doctor said. His white hair smelled of oil, anointment. His eyes had moved to the Book on her lap, and she rested her hand on it.

"Thank you," she said.

He smiled and settled himself next to her on the bed.

"I'm a Bible reader myself." He looked away, and his face assumed a serious expression. "Do you know why you're here, Frances? Do you

remember anything of what happened before you . . . slept?"

She waited a long moment before answering, "Some."

"Do you feel we should talk about it now?"

She hesitated again, probing her feelings. "Not yet."

"All right, then. Whenever you feel ready." Suddenly he put his large, warm hand on hers, both their hands settling on the Book. "I want to help you, you know. You must love life very much to have come back this far."

"I know," Frances said, and again she found herself warming into a smile.

Somewhere far in the recesses of the hospital, someone gave a piercing cry and then was silent. The doctor was looking at the window, at the falling darkness outside. There was a strange expression on his face. He looked as though he were battling with himself over some dilemma. Once again there came a short cry from far off, and then silence.

"Frances," the doctor said in a low voice.

"Yes?"

"You're very sick, you know that?"

"I know that, Doctor."

"I want to help you."

His voice had changed, was less soothing.

"You're a very attractive young woman, Frances."

He was a different person now. The broad, soft features had steeled; the gray, moist eyes hardened into walls. The kindly exterior had been pulled inside to reveal something animal-like, mindless, filled with blind force.

"Let him kiss me with the kisses of his mouth," he gasped, "for thy love is better than wine."

He put his hands on her arms, pinning her against the pillows. "It won't do you any good to scream," he said, "because no one will care. They all know you're a sick woman." He stood up and fingered the belt on his white smock trousers. Frances stared at his large hands, at the trousers, at the belt. "No one would believe you," he said again. "When I first saw you, when you were confined to a ward at the county hospital, I knew I had to have you here." He was speaking as if she was not in the room, as if he was alone, repeating a litany to himself. "Strange things happen all the time in places like this, and no one cares." He loosened his belt, and his trousers slid down. Frances saw that his legs were thick and hairy. "You understand all of this, don't you?"

Frances said nothing but only stared, terrified, at his thick legs.

The doctor was lost in himself now; he pulled his underpants down quickly.

"I don't want you to say anything. I don't want you to scream or call out." He talked in little breaths as he moved toward her.

Frances' eyes were locked to the thing between his legs. It was the thing the boys around the schoolyard, and sometimes Billy Bayer after Sunday school, called "cock." Once she heard Billy Bayer call after her, in a voice that was taunting but at the same time hushed and uneasy, "You want to touch my cock, Frances?" The thing between the doctor's legs was bloated. She knew what that meant: sex. Down deep inside she tightened like a spring, and her insides went cold as though water was soaking her all over again.

"I won't hurt you," the doctor said. He was next to the bed, bending closer to her. Frances stared at the thing between his legs—it reminded her of something. . . . The bed creaked, sagging as the doctor kneeled on it, and suddenly everything dawned on her. As the doctor's cock moved closer to her, as he arched it up over her, she looked at it and it came to her what it was. It was something else, long and serpentine, uncoiling, growing longer and longer

A hose; it was a long and evil hose, and the full memory of Jeb unlocked in her brain and she was standing next to the truck waiting for Jeb, holding the Book that he had mysteriously told her to take. The truck was gaily painted with circus clowns in red, white and yellow and had big flowers on the doors; and on the back of the tank, where the hose was wrapped, was the word 'FUN!' spelled in large, crooked, balloon-like letters.

She was alone next to the truck, and then she heard Jeb's boots crunch on the gravel as he approached. "Into the truck," he said, and as she climbed up, there was a roar, and the barn and the house exploded into high flames. Frances saw a row of Jeb's paintings, neatly stacked on the front porch, melt in a riot of colors and disappear into orange fire.

"Jeb—" Frances began as he climbed into the cab, settling himself down, but her words died in her throat. The face he turned on her was not his, was worse than any face she had ever seen on him before, a mix of his own face and white bones, something possessed. He gunned the truck into loud life and they pulled out, leaving a mountain of flame and a growing burned stench behind.

Jeb was silent, but as the art fair rose into view, his lips stretched into a cracked smile. He turned his hard eyes for a moment on the little cluster of roped-off tables where paintings hung on clothesline or were strung from boards; then he turned them back on the road again.

They circled the art show, slowly. At first no one noticed, but then a few children caught sight of the painted truck. Soon others, adults bored with ill-defined landscapes and paintings of children holding flowers, gathered at the perimeter. At each appearance of the truck,

they cheered.

"Drive," Jeb said, pulling Frances by the arm over to the driver's side.

"Jeb—"

"Do it," he said, squeezing her arm tight.

She slid across the seat, noting that the spot where Jeb had been sitting was still cool. She kept the truck moving in a slow circle, arching her back to see over the steering wheel and out past the hood. Jeb climbed over her and out the passenger side onto the running board. He slammed the door behind him and made his way to the back of the truck, where he threw a switch, and then twin horns on the roof of the cab began playing loud circus music. Another cheer went up, and someone said, "That's Jeb." A hush fell over the crowd until Jeb waved and grinned.

Slowly he began to unravel the hose at the back of the truck. It had a huge bronze nozzle, and he suddenly twisted it, sending a fine spray of rainbow colors out over the spectators. Bright dots mixed in midair, forming beautiful shades, then separated to combine with other colors in a continuous shower of bright glitter.

"Jeb's painting us a picture in the air!" someone said.

The truck circled. Everyone from the art show was watching now. Jeb spun the nozzle to a tighter spray so it would reach out over them all. On the second pass, the colors hung a little longer in the air and didn't dissolve as quickly, some in the crowd began to complain that little oily bits of color were sticking to them. Jeb wound the hose in. There was another small hose, set in the side of the truck. Jeb pulled it out and snapped the nozzle open. Flame leaped out, catching those in front and setting them instantly ablaze.

There was panic, but it was already too late. The flames spread through the air, each dot of color exploding into a miniature fireball, the heat leaping from one to the next in a tornado around the art show.

As Frances saw the flames wrap around the crowd in front of her, she pulled her foot from the accelerator. "Keep going!" Jeb shouted menacingly from the back, but she sat stunned. The door opened with a loud creak, and he pushed her aside roughly, jamming his foot to the gas pedal. The fire quickly spread from the outer fringes of the crowd inward: there was no escape. A heaving, flaming ring of people were trying in a mindless rush to find some way out of the fire. Frances saw some of them go down in the wake of a forming stampede. Some tried to move inward, but this was no escape because the fire was spreading in all directions. The art pieces now caught fire, and tongues of multicolored flame were licking across clotheslines and outlining wooden walls and tables.

Frances began to weep, her eyes fastened to what was happening. Jeb made one more slow arc around as, with a great whoosh, the judging stand in the center caught fire, balling into heat all at once, its red-and-white painted sides mingling and then disappearing into a globe of yellow and blue. The flames were still spreading outward. As Jeb pulled the truck into a leaning turn away, Frances saw, just at the edge of the fire, a little girl wandering in a circle bordered by the inferno, shouting, "Mommy, Mommy." The circle swept in at her like a closing iris.

Frances screamed and grabbed at the steering wheel. Jeb pushed her back against the seat, but she had taken him unaware. As he fought to regain control of the truck, it swerved wildly, back and forth, and then tipped over. As Frances climbed out, she saw Jeb escape behind her. Somewhere she heard "Mommy. . .” and then silence.

Jeb looked stunned, confused; he stared dumbly at the wall of fire for a moment, and then a wail of despair leaped from his throat. He sounded like a wounded animal. Frances put her hand on him, and he looked down at her as if seeing her for the first time.

"Go away," he said.

"Jeb, we have to get out of here." She saw now that she was still holding the Book in one hand, had been clutching it all along.

"Go!" Jeb said, and his face had that look on it, that look of caring, that she had seen so rarely but knew was always there. "Run," he said desperately. "1 can't be with you anymore. *For God's sake, love only life*."

"Jeb!" she shouted at him.

And then he screamed, but not for her. His arms, black and red, flew up over his head, reaching for something above him that wasn't there and couldn't be reached. His knuckles cracked and ripped with the strain, his thin arms and hands and each finger, each stretched muscle, standing out taut against the flames behind him; and then his mouth opened, and opened, and the scream got louder and louder as his mouth became wider and wider, the lips pulling away and the skin peeling back from the face, the skull and skin and blood flying and flaking from his bones. Still the scream continued. The naked skull, with its horrid bone mouth screamed, and the eyes, melting away, leaving black holes, still pointed at the sky. The whole skeleton strained. The scream reached its peak—and Frances put her hands to her ears as the bones turned in an instant to dust. For one moment Jeb's skeleton hands reached out to her, empty eyes pleading with her —and then there was a huge inrush of air, and the bones flew to bits and were gone, sucked away into the fire.

For a brief moment there was silence. Frances pulled her hands

from her ears. She heard a roar and she looked up to see a wall of flame advancing on her, and in the midst of it, an uncoiling hose, its nozzle undulating like a snake's head. She held out the Book to keep it away, and above the roar came a deep, mirthless laugh, a hollow rumble of laughter.

She held up the Bible, and the doctor hesitated above her. The glazed look in his eyes cleared and he opened his mouth to speak, but nothing came out. Someone was laughing in one corner of the room. The doctor fell back, his face turning as red as blood, and dropped away from her to the floor. After a moment he was still, his heaving chest as hard as rock. Frances stared at him, at the dead, wilted hose between his legs, and then there was a noise from the corner of the room.

She dropped the Book and lay back against the starched pillows, frozen.

Someone backed toward the window, and she saw the outline of a thin, short coat as the figure settled itself against the wall. There was a tiny flash of blue light and the sound of someone drawing on a cigarette. A dark plume of smoke drifted up across the screen.

Frances lay motionless. Her hand went out, feeling for the Bible, but she could not find it.

"Leave it," Ash said, and he smoked for a moment before saying anything more.

"Did you miss me, Frances? It's been a long time."

She was shivering as though she were back in that wet room again, wearing those starched, wet clothes.

"I thought you would have missed me. I was holding your hand always, you know."

His hand rose lazily, outlined like gloved bone against the window.

"Thought I was gone forever?" Ash queried. "Thought that with Jeb's passing I would dissolve also?"

Frances pressed herself into the pillows, trying to shut him out.

"What did you think, Frances?"

He came to her bed, stepping over the silent body of the doctor, looming over her. His head came down to her face. She felt a cold space envelope her, as if all the heat in the room had been sucked away, leaving a vacuum. She could breathe, but still she choked. His face, his non-face, was like a balloon being lowered by an invisible hand. There was a mouth but no mouth—the maw of a fish turned inside out. The eyes were there except when she tried to look directly into them. His flesh was too white; the red line around his mouth was not red, but merely the absence of every color save red. He was solid, and yet he was not there.

She wanted to whimper, to cry out for mercy, but could do nothing except stare up into the face that sank slowly, slowly. . . .

"Kiss me, Frances," the non-mouth said. It opened into an oval, and inside it she heard a rushing cold wind and saw only blackness.

"Kiss me. . . ."

She threw her hands up in front of her eyes against the horrible cold and black, and then she was off the bed, her hand brushing over something hard and grabbing it, and out the door and in the corridor, empty, neon-lit with light-blue floor tiles and white walls. There was no sound from either end of the hallway. She moved toward the front of the building, past the guard asleep by the desk and the nurse at the admissions counter, her back to the reception area and her ear to the phone—"I don't care what he says, he'd better have that goddam alimony check to me by Monday, or my lawyer. . . ."—and then she was through the double swinging doors and out on the front walk, white concrete leading twenty steps down to a long, sloping lawn and a gate just swinging open to let a long, black car through. She ran out after it, stopping a block away under a dull street lamp in the night, alone. She looked down and saw that she was clutching the Book. She looked up at the street lamp, at the light on the top, and at that moment it became the Northern Star.

She wandered away, but the star stayed with her, and as she prayed, clutching the Book to her breast, muttering into the night, praying only for life, the veil came down around her. . . .

But it will happen again.

Now.

"This will be better than the first time," Ash said. His death mask spread into a grin. "This will be better than all the times. Do you know why, Frances? Because I am the resurrection and the life: he that believeth in me, though he were dead yet shall he live. And whosoever liveth and believeth in me shall never die." He bent down over her. "Do you believe in me, Frances?"

She looked up at him, and she knew it was true. He had been the Northern Star, the veil that had dropped upon her, to lift and fall again and again. There had never been, never could be, salvation. She was lost and always had been. Abomination. So there had been no third Him after all, only him she sought to push away (who had suckled her all along) and him she mourned. *Jeb*. Her brother. Her father. The Northern Star, the Book, had been illusions, hope turned inside out. There would be no redemption.

She let the Book drop at her feet and looked up. Ash's strange, grinning face was as the rising sun.

The Northern Star.

"You can love me just as much, Frances." he said.

"Yes."

His face lowered, and then his lips touched hers. It was as though magnetic poles had been reversed within her; white had become black. She felt no great hatred, but rather a great love moved from north to south. *Yes*, she thought; *yes*. Ash's lips were locked upon her, and she drew deeply of his kiss. She saw a long tunnel, a burst of far light that rushed toward her but was quickly extinguished. Something within her, her single precious thing, was gone, and in its place was another love, equally—if oppositely—fulfilling.

Yes.

She opened her eyes, and Ash was there, smiling, bathed in a blood-warm light, his face flushed and satisfied.

"I waited a long time for you, Frances," Ash whispered. "I knew that when I finally had you, you would be all I ever needed."

"Yes," Frances said. *Yes.*

It will happen again. Now.

And again.

And again.

THIRTEEN

Plain as day, Mayor Poundridge had seen his dead father waiting for him just inside the gates to the new amusement park. Plain as day, he'd seen that bemused, tolerant look, the look that said, "You're my son, and you'll do all right," and the ache of recognition and remembered loss had grown so strong that all other thoughts had disappeared. Despite the impossibility, not an atom of doubt had been in his mind. It was his father; he was alive again, period. Only joy and reunion could follow.

But where was his father now?

And where was Emily?

Emily had been right behind him as they rushed up to the gates. When he saw the swell of people begin to gather there, he'd felt it was his duty to be the first through—to say something to them, to make the occasion *official*. Heck, it was his privilege. Some were in their nightclothes, but most wore light summer shirts or blouses and pants. Most looked expectant, but some looked downright joyful—like that Reggie Carson's mother. She was staring at the sky, and Poundridge had looked up just in time to catch sight of a plane, long and sleek, before it was lost in the glare of the lights. Hadn't her husband died in a plane crash?

There was a great swell of anticipation. Emily had been beside him then, he knew, because she had clutched his arm and pointed to a short woman beyond the entrance who looked like her departed Aunt Lucy. At that point Poundridge felt he had to speak, and he pushed his way to the closed gates, Emily following.

"Friends!" he shouted, and for a moment they ignored him, too caught up in their own emotions to pay attention. But he knew crowds —there were too many politician's genes in him for something like this to stand in his way—and when Emily put her hand on his arm, he tried again.

"Friends, please!" This time a few heads turned. "This is a great occasion in our town's history, and I just wanted you to know that I am here to represent—"

Then the gates swung open, and his words disappeared in the surge forward. He was just able to push to the front as the great mass flowed into the park.

He was sure Emily had still been with him at that point. He had felt her hand on his arm as they went through, had even patted it. But then he'd seen something that annoyed him. He had thought he was the first to enter the park, but somehow that scamp Pup Malamut had found his way in before him. There he was, standing next to a stall that said "Guess Your Weight" in fresh red letters. He was smiling,

with his arms folded. The nerve of that boy! Everything else was pushed from his mind at that moment, and when Pup turned and began to swagger away down one of the causeways, Poundridge stalked after him.

It was then he discovered that he had somehow been separated from Emily. He tried to catch sight of her closely bunned hair in the crowd, but she was nowhere in sight. Which was strange, because she was always there, like a hand or a foot, always where she was supposed to be. What had she been wearing? He couldn't remember. A blue dress? Brown? He didn't even know if she owned a brown dress. He hadn't really looked at her in years; she had just always been there. When he needed something, there Emily was, with a file from the office, or his pipe, which he was always mislaying—anything. He found it hard now to remember what she looked like, it had been so long since he had really looked at her. To live with someone so long and yet forget what she looked like. . . .

Pup Malamut was disappearing around a corner.

Mayor Poundridge hesitated a moment, then turned to go after the boy. Emily was important, but this was more important. The youngster had smirked at him, as though he knew the mayor had lost face and he was gloating over it. That wouldn't do. Pup Malamut's father had caused trouble for Mayor Poundridge, had challenged him a few times in Council meetings and had even considered running against him once. They were a high and mighty bunch, that Malamut family, and there was no reason why the mayor should put up with it any longer. He'd teach old Malamut a lesson this time. They thought money could buy everything and, well, it couldn't. Not everything. He'd catch that boy by the scruff of the neck and

When he got to the corner, the boy had vanished. A long line of shooting galleries and other games of chance lay before the mayor. There were a few people milling about, but Pup Malamut was not among them. The mayor thought of asking anyone if they'd seen the boy, but that would only call attention to the fact that Pup had upstaged him. He was about to turn away, to go back and find Emily, when he caught sight of the boy leaning over the counter of the last game tent, pitching softballs into an angled barrel. He finished the game and turned away, but not before giving the mayor that insolent took again.

Infuriated, Poundridge followed. *Damn boy,* he thought. He instantly rebuked himself for thinking a curse word, but the sentiment would not leave him. He reached the game tent where Pup had been and stopped to regain his breath. He looked and saw that all three softballs were neatly nestled in the wooden barrel.

For the oddest moment, as Mayor Poundridge looked at that barrel

with those three large balls in it, it became a face, and the three balls merged into two enormous eyes—an animal of some sort stared at him. But like Marley's face on Scrooge's door knocker, the vision passed. His mind still bent on catching the boy. Poundridge moved on.

He turned into another causeway, this more isolated than the other; the lights were not quite so bright and there were dark patches of shadow. It was, in fact, a rear alley of sorts; the backs of tents lined either side, and occasionally there was a thump as a mis-aimed baseball or thudding dart struck against the canvas. It was very dark ahead of the mayor, as if all the brightness had suddenly bled out and night had fallen in. Pup was nowhere to be seen. Poundridge's anger began to subside, replaced by a hint of anxiety. Maybe it wasn't Pup he had seen after all; maybe that hadn't been Pup pitching softballs.

He advanced a step at a time. As he passed the space between two tents, there came a sound. He jumped and then saw a softball rolling toward him. Vaguely he heard voices and the distant, murky tinkle of the calliope. The ball rolled to a stop at his foot, just inside a small pool of dim light. Poundridge looked down at it. There was a face on it: the face he had seen in the barrel with the three balls in it—large and round, the face of a lion or a hare, with monstrous eyes. The eyes stared up at him, becoming bigger and bigger until they filled the whole face.

Then the face vaporized, and Poundridge kicked the ball into the shadows ahead. The lights had gone out. He was standing under the only light to be seen. There was a glow of luminosity to his right, from between the two tents, but as he watched, it faded. Above him there was a single dim bulb taped to a tall pole, along with a speaker horn. The calliope music he heard was coming tinnily from the horn.

Someone lit a match very close in front of him. As quickly as it flared, it went out.

"You'd like to go back?" a disembodied voice said.

Poundridge turned to flee. Immediately he collided with something solid in the dark, banging his face and shoulder against it. He staggered back, holding his bleeding nose. The voice behind him laughed, and he reached out to see what he had hit.

It was solid, a wooden beam connected to wooden struts. He could not see it but he traced the outline of the structure with his hands, frantically trying to feel his way around it. The laugh, low and coarse, came again. He found a step at the far right of the structure; since there was no way to get beyond that, he felt upward another step, and then another, until his hand chanced upon something not made of wood—a leg, as cold as ice, with a smooth shoe on the foot. He pulled back with a start.

"What's happening here?" he called out in a tremulous voice. His

fear did not allow him to project the authority he wanted.

The bulb overhead brightened, the filament inside glowing hotter and hotter as though turned up by a dimmer switch. Now light filled the entire space in front of him, revealing the sharp outline of timbers and struts leading upward into the dark.

Poundridge looked up at the figure attached to the leg he had felt on the stairway.

"Hello, son," the figure said.

"Father?"

Poundridge gazed into the face of his father. He blinked fiercely, not believing his eyes. So it was true. Momentary joy welled up within him, but instantly it was gone. When he had seen his father through the gates of the amusement park, it had *seemed* right. It was impossible, but it had been all right. Now he knew it wasn't right—that something was horribly not right. A curtain had been lifted from his mind, and what had seemed before a joyful reunion was now, in cold, clear logic, a terrible event.

On the step above the one on which his father stood was another figure; it resembled his father but was a bit stouter. On the step above that was another figure, and another up into the darkness. Mayor Poundridge stood staring into a dim, silent line of faces, each like his own, each fuller and fatter than the one below.

"I'm losing my mind," he muttered, trying to blink away the phantoms before him.

"No," said that cold, disembodied, slightly amused voice behind him. Jonathan Poundridge whirled around but saw nothing except darkness. Turning back, he fully expected the silent line of clones to be gone, but it was not.

Poundridge's father said, “This is my father behind me, and his father behind him. All your ancestors stand before you. Jonathan."

"You're all *dead*,” the mayor said to them, still hoping they might vanish like smoke, drift away like ghosts, along with the darkness and the wooden structure, and that he would find himself back at the entrance to the amusement park, bidding all of Montvale to have a good time, and Emily by his side.

"Emily," he said, feeling very alone without her.

From higher up on the wooden structure, above the cone of light, someone sniggered. Another bright bulb flashed on, and Poundridge saw who it was.

"You. . .”

Pup Malamut grinned down at him, an odd, triumphant smile on his face, his tee shirt askew, half-pulled out of his pants.

"Yes.” Pup said. "Mad at me, aren't you?"

Poundridge's anger returned. But it melted like butter at the sound

of the other voice, the voice in darkness.

"Go ahead." the voice laughed.

Pup Malamut clattered down the wooden steps, making them creak with his weight, and ran off sniggering into the night. Poundridge wanted to go after him but found that he was unable to move. It occurred to him that this entire episode, this black-and-white scene, black of night with white light from the bulbs on the pole, looked exactly like one of those old television shows from the nineteen sixties. Like a scene from *Gunsmoke* or that strange show he had watched once but never again, making Emily turn it off when he didn't understand it: *The Outer Limits.*

"Get on with it," the voice behind him said. It sounded bored, yet tinged with anticipation.

Jonathan Poundridge went limp in the knees. A terror gripped him by the back and paralyzed him. The curtain that had been drawn over his mind was yanked away, and he knew that something horrible was going to happen to him. This was no stunt, no amusement-park ride or crazy dream he had wandered into. Something bad was going to happen to him, and there would be no Emily there to help him or tell him what to do.

"Pup Malamut!" he called desperately. "Come back and help me. I promise nothing will happen to you—1 won't even tell your father!"

His own father's dead face, dead voice, seemed almost to be pleading with him now, for understanding, for . . . forgiveness?

"We . . . must. . . ."

The light beam traveled slowly up the steps to stop at a platform at the top. Poundridge looked up at the silent white faces of his ancestors.

The voice behind him grew hard and commanding. "Walk."

Poundridge tried to resist but could not. He began to whimper. His foot, in spite of his efforts to keep it where it was, moved forward a hesitating step, and then the other foot followed. He was on the first step with his father.

"Keep going," the voice commanded.

His feet lifted, set down, lifted, set down. Step by step he passed first his grandfather (a vague memory, smelling of strong tobacco and old war stories), then a succession of ghosts, each vaguer and fuller of body than the one before. It was as though something corporeal, something of the flesh, had been bled out of each succeeding generation of Poundridges, leaving his own lean body to answer to the ages. Each ancestor wore a different kind of clothing, and it was, as he passed, like watching the same man slowly gain weight and move through a succession of time shifts into the past.

He was on the top step.

His feet stopped. There was something before him on the platform that he did not want to see. The light ceased, knife-sharp, a few feet in front of him, and he felt out there in the darkness a presence that made his stomach turn over.

"Emily!" he called, but he heard the word as it left his mouth swallowed, as if his face had been muffled by a pillow.

He heard a slow tread on the steps and knew it was the voice in the dark.

"Oh, God," he whimpered.

"Move," the voice said from directly behind him.

He advanced, a reluctant puppet. He saw and then felt hands reach out of the darkness, hands and arms that seemed to come out of a solid wall of black. They took hold of him and propelled him forward; at the same time, something was quickly wrapped around his neck and pulled tight.

Illumination blossomed all around him, making night into day again, revealing the platform and the tall, straight length of timber that rose behind him and elbowed over his head to hold the thick hemp rope that was knotted around his thin, sweating neck.

A dark man stood there. "Ever hear of 'the sins of the fathers,' Mr. Mayor?" the mouth in the white, sack-like face said.

"Tell me what's happening here," Poundridge wept; once again he tried desperately to put authority into his words but failed.

"Let's get on with it," the other said, ignoring him.

A solid terror started in Mayor Poundridge's stomach and immediately reached to the ends of his body. *I'm going to die,* he thought, amazed that he was even taking the time to think such a thing; *I really am.* With further illogic he thought, *This is what men in war feel like.* There had been only one other time when he had perceived anything like this. He had been watching a movie on television called *Paths of Glory.* Kirk Douglas was in it. He had tuned in because he thought it would be a good war picture and he had always liked war pictures. But this was something different. Kirk Douglas was defending three French soldiers who had been accused of not following orders during World War 1; they had been told to go over the top and had refused. They were to be court-martialed and shot. His uneasiness had begun when he realized that *everyone* in the men's regiment had disobeyed the orders and that these three had been picked at random as examples. It was obvious that despite Kirk Douglas, they would be shot at the end of the movie. Poundridge had watched with mounting fascination and horror as the film zeroed in on the three soldiers and made them into real characters. They were just men. The order to go over the top had been insane, and they were just unlucky enough to get picked to take the punishment.

Poundridge had wanted to turn the movie off but found that he couldn't. Inevitably the men were led out to execution, and he saw them actually tremble as they realized that this would be it; they were going to die; the rifles of the firing squad would be aiming at their hearts and then pumping little slugs of lead into them, and in a minute, five minutes from now, three minutes from now, whenever, they would be dead. As the firing squad took aim after the blindfolds had been put in place, one of the men began to whimper, to cry, and Poundridge had suddenly leaped from the sofa and hit the "Off" knob on the television. He had stood there, shaken, for a few minutes, and then had gone to bed without watching the news or anything else. The next morning Emily had mentioned to him that he hadn't touched the potato chips she'd put out for him the night before, or the soda, and was there something the matter with him?

And now it was going to happen to him. Here he was, with this thick rope tight against his neck, tighter than any collar he had ever worn, so tight he could feel individual gnarled strands against the flesh of his neck, could feel the tautness of the rope if he moved his head from side to side—and in a few moments, in three minutes or five, the wooden planking beneath his feet would give way and there would be nothing for him to stand upon. Either his neck would break or he would gulp for air that wasn't there, and he would *die*. He would be *dead*. Every cell in his body knew that, every cell fought against it, but there was nothing any of them could do. In five minutes at most, he would no longer be here; he would be dead. Gone.

"Oh, God, please," he began to whimper.

The man on the platform next to him, a fat, nameless copy of himself with averted eyes and trembling hands, put his fingers on the straight piece of wood that would release the trap door beneath Jonathan Poundridge.

"Please, no," Poundridge whimpered, but the fat man would not look at him.

"I've changed my mind, Ash," a quiet voice said from below.

The fat man paused with his fingers on the lever. The light softened; the stark black and white of the scene (that was the way Paths of Glory had looked) shifted to a more natural shade of night. The clench in Poundridge's stomach, the rock-hard fist, loosened a fraction.

For the slightest moment, Ash seemed to shrink down into his clothes. But this passed so quickly that Poundridge could not swear it had happened. With slow, deliberate steps, Ash dismounted the gallows until he stood on the black tarmac at the bottom, facing Jeff Scott. Miraculously, Poundridge discovered he was able to move, and he leaned forward, the rope pulling taut at the back of his neck, to

watch what went on below.

"You've changed your mind?" Ash asked calmly but with a tinge of ominousness slithering beneath. "Yes," Jeff Scott answered.

"What do you think happens now?" Ash questioned. His words rose to a shrill shout. Jeff Scott flinched. "Do I walk away? Do you? What happens, you fool?"

Jeff Scott answered, "You tell me, Ash." Then he said, "I think you're afraid of me."

Ash's arms rose; for a moment they seemed as high as the top of the platform—two long, horrid spider legs, as thin and taut as piano wire, with horrible claws at the tips. But then they were only long, thin arms again.

"Do you think this is all for *you*?" Ash screamed.

Jeff Scott fell to his knees. "Do you think this whole stinking world was created for your indulgence? I've watched you. From the very beginning, I've watched your introspection with amusement. Trying to come to terms with yourself. Trying to understand your hate. Trying to figure out why you found yourself on this stinking earth again, a walking corpse with feelings and emotions." Ash mocked in a falsetto: "Oh. Lord, why am I here? What is my mission? Why have I been brought back?" He raised a hand to strike. "You fool! Haven't you figured out by this time that you're one of the walking dead? *That's all you are!* There isn't any *hope* for you, no reason for you to try to puzzle out your predicament. Right now, at this moment, as you walk and seemingly breathe and push at the world with your little hands and try to figure out the universe, *you are dead.*" Ash raised his hand even higher and brought it down in a long, scythe-like arc. Jeff Scott screamed as half his face was torn away. In its place was a half-exposed skull with bits of muscle and tissue attached to it. He shrieked, throwing his hands up to his face, but though the pain diminished, the wound was still there, open and alive.

"Look at me," Ash commanded, and Jeff Scott looked into his face. The white, pasty mask melted away into a silver disk, a pool of water or a liquid mirror, and Jeff Scott saw his own face as it was now, half-living and half-dead. He felt fire course down his body and saw the flesh and blood stripped away from one side. "Stop!" he screamed, but the pain would not cease. He was half-bone and half-flesh.

"This is what you are," Ash spat, pointing contemptuously at the skeletal half. "This is what you have been for a hundred and twenty years, since that gallows rope choked your breath way. A *dead* man." Ash stretched a talon-like hand toward the sky. "All of this is gone for you: all of this is dead to you. You can't touch or feel it. You might as well be maggots and soil for all the difference it makes to you. You're a worm, a pile of filth." He pushed at Jeff Scott, pushed at the bones

on the left side of his body, and Jeff Scott felt the hand there, cold against cold bone. He collapsed, and Ash's face hovered over him. "Your hate sealed you long ago," Ash said quietly. "Do you still think I fear you?"

Jeff Scott looked into that non-face, into the eyes that were puddles of blue emptiness, at that red mouth, and said, "You're afraid of something."

A crack appeared deep in the mask. There was fear in that blank emptiness, in those ice-blank eyes, and for a hushed tick of time, Jeff Scott saw Ash's face for the mask it really was—the hard, vicious play-face held over something fathomless and cruelly sure, yet deathly frightened.

Ash's bladelike lips parted, and he screamed into Jeff Scott's face. The cry climbed to an impossible pitch of rage. Jeff saw the face above the mouth contort, the outstretched, arching hand ready to fall upon him. . . .

A moment of infinity passed.

"No," Ash said finally. "That's what you want.” He rose, leaving Jeff Scott on the ground before him. "I won't give you that. But I will give you this."

Ash turned to the gallows and made a curt motion to the man at the top. Poundridge, who had been watching the scene below with fascination, almost forgetting that he was a player in the drama—thinking, with an insubstantial spark of hope, that possibly this was a form of entertainment after all, some part of the amusement park designed to give the customer a real thrill, something to remember for a long time—was abruptly pulled back to his situation. The rope was still around his neck. He still stood on the gallows; the pleading in his defense that had gone on below had not worked to his favor. The fist in his stomach gripped harder. He knew that the moment was upon him, the reprieve past. He saw his chubby ancestor's trembling but ineluctable hands tighten on the lever to the trap door, and he cried out for pardon, to be let free. Like James Cagney, he thought insanely, at the end of that picture where they drag him to the electric chair screaming and pleading. Panic seized him even more fiercely, and he began to wail.

"Please don't do this! I haven't done anything! Please! Oh, God, *please*!"

The fat ancestor's hands trembled like leaves in the wind.

Jeff Scott tried to raise himself, but failed. As he fell back against the cold ground, Poundridge became hysterical. He felt his bowels empty, and at that moment the trap door pulled open.

"The sins of the fathers," Ash said, his eyes growing bright.

Jonathan Poundridge cried out as the earth was pulled away from

him. He fell a long way, past row on row of his own face, each growing thinner, each silently turned toward him. He watched the dissipation of a race of men. And then he heard rather than felt a loud snap, and everything in his body was on fire, including his shrieking voice, which he heard no more.

FOURTEEN

"I don't want to go in," Jack said. There was a quality in his voice that promised it would take a lot of convincing to change his mind.

Big black clouds rammed across the sky overhead, and the wind hissed like snakes through the trees. It felt more like October than July. Though the low white churchyard gates were swung open, they formed as much of a barrier in Jack's mind as if there had been solid rock before him.

"We've got to," Reggie said. "This is where it wanted me to go." As he took a tentative step forward, an animal-like light came into his eyes. And when he said, "Come on, Jack," Jack knew he meant it.

Jack had heard Reggie talk that way before, in that suddenly serious, non-kid voice that implied, "Don't be a jerk, just do it." Now there was an urgency in the tone that Jack had never heard before. It wasn't fear in Reggie's voice, but a thing much worse, a thing that made Jack even more frightened than he already was: eagerness.

"Now I'll finally know," Reggie said. "No more dreams; I'll finally know." He turned. "Don't worry, Jack."

Jack offered a weak smile. Reggie entered the cemetery, passing the short line of trees that led to the upslope of green grass and gravestones. A neat black road wound like an *Alice in Wonderland* street, curving in an S up and away from them, around the perfectly sculpted hills.

"Wow," Reggie said, and Jack, his hands thrust into his pockets against the chill, whipping wind, couldn't help muttering the same word.

In front of each headstone, each plaque, each featureless slab, they saw a neatly dug hole, six feet by three feet, with a clod of turned earth next to it. It was as if all the grave diggers in the world had convened at once to leave their mark.

"I don't believe this," Jack said, putting his hands deeper into his pockets.

Reggie was silent. There was a slightly crooked smile on his lips, as if he had grown older in that moment. "Now I'm sure," he said. "I didn't want to believe it, but now I do. Ever since that amusement park arrived, that shadow man, the eyes. . . ." As he talked, he began to walk up the hill, past the first of the open graves. Jack followed.

"Can you smell it?" Reggie asked, stopping in front of a deep, dark hole and sniffing at the air. "Can you?"

"No," Jack started to say, but then there it was, a sickly sweet odor like over-baked bread.

"Can you taste it?" Reggie asked.

A taste was there: sharp and bitter on the front of the tongue, hard

and stale at the back of the mouth. Cold, like a bad, chill wind that made the teeth ache.

Jack yelped with fright as Reggie leaped down into the nearest hole and stood there regarding him.

"It's stronger down here. Can't you feel it?" Reggie asked, and now Jack *could* feel it, a dull, sodden feeling that mixed with the taste and the smell. "Part of them is here and part of them isn't."

"I don't like this, Reggie," Jack said, not trying to hide the shakiness in his voice.

Reggie climbed out of the hole and stood beside him.

"This is why the eyes wanted me to come here," he said. His face was lit with purpose and inner fire. "Don't you see? I'm finally going to know what's over that ledge. I'm finally going to know what I have to do! Stay with me," he said, putting his hand on his friend's shoulder.

"I can't," Jack said. His skin was crawling with damp, dark feelings; he wanted to run to a place where it wasn't gray and chilly, where the sun didn't look so lifeless, where the clouds were clouds and not looming dark shapes ready to pounce, where there were no dark holes, no white gates to swing shut and keep you in. From off in the distance, the calliope music came drifting to him, and now it soothed him. His skin was alive with feelings, as if things were crawling and sliding all over it, gray, wet, damp things that wanted to force him to the ground and drag him into the nearest yawning cavity.

"Let's go to the amusement park," he said, his voice husky and breathless.

"Not yet," Reggie said.

"There's light there, everyone else is there." He looked with a vague longing at the soft, glowing lights beyond the trees. "My mother and sister are there."

Reggie grabbed him by the shoulders. "Fight it, Jack! It's the calliope music. Fight it like you did before! You were the only one in the whole town to find a way to beat that calliope, the only one brave enough to fight it—so keep on doing it!"

"My mother, my sister—"

"Your mother and sister are dead! They were in holes in this cemetery two days ago! Stay with me, Jack!"

Reggie held Jack's arm and walked on.

They passed through a universe of open graves, up through time, through the great historic mass of Montvale's dead, and still the feelings, the crawling, slippery feelings over Jack's body and brain, became stronger.

"No more!" Jack cried, trying to break free from Reggie's grasp.

Reggie held firm, pointing to the mausoleum, the Tomb of the Unknown Man, a dark-gray box at the top of the "That's where the

eyes want me to go," he said. "That's where I have to go."

"Oh, God. I'm scared!" Jack cried.

There were trees close by, as manicured as the lawns and roadway were. The entire world was gray. Close together, the two boys climbed the knoll. Even before they reached the mausoleum, Reggie knew the door would be wide open. It made a dark outline against the grayer sky.

"We've got to go in there," Reggie said, drawing his flashlight from his pack. After a moment, shaking, Jack followed suit. The twin beams laced through each other, then settled on the gaping black cavity of the vault's door.

"Remember all those nights we sat out here, you and Pup and me, alone in the dark, telling stories?" Reggie asked. "Remember how hard we tried to scare ourselves? It was all phony, and I knew it. We were playing games. All the time we were pretending to be scared, we were laughing because we weren't scared at all. But this is real, Jack." His voice changed, became lower, filled with awe. "Can't you feel it, Jack? Can't you feel what's coming out of that room? It's something you could catch in a box and listen to. It's *real*. Not lights out with rubber spiders in the dark. That's the real thing in there, what I've been looking for." He stared at his friend, his eyes wide with wonder. "Can't you feel it, Jack? That's *it*."

Jack felt it, and he froze like a rabbit in a headlight. It would come out and get him; it would hit him on the head and splash his brains all over the pavement in front of this crypt; it would—

"I'm going," he said.

"Jack. . . ."

"I have to go."

"Jack, we have to go in there, we have to know—"

"I don't want to know!"

Reggie's grip tightened on Jack's arm, trying to pull him through the door into the vault. With each forced step, Jack's terror grew. Suddenly he lashed out in panic, striking Reggie in the face with the flat of his hand. Reggie held on.

Shouting with rage, Jack hit Reggie with his fist. The two boys went down, rolling like wrestlers on the perfect lawn in front of the crypt. Reggie was losing, and then he abruptly rolled on top of his friend and pinned him down by sitting on his chest, his knees pinning down Jack's arms and flailing hands.

"Let me go!" Jack screamed, his voice filled with panic.

"Jack! Listen to me!"

"Oh, God, let me go!" He bucked upward, trying to throw Reggie off.

"Listen to me!" Reggie shouted into Jack's face.

"No!" Jack screamed back. "Let me go! Let me go”

Jack lurched upward, throwing Reggie to one side. He grabbed at Reggie's arms and pulled them away, hurling Reggie to the ground as he got to his feet. His face was wild; his pack had come undone, spilling its contents halfway out onto the ground. He stood over Reggie for a moment, trying to decide whether or not to jump on him and pummel him. He was crying. He took a few steps backward, his flashlight showing a long, monstrous shadow behind him.

"I . . . told . . . you." Jack gasped, "to leave me . . . alone.”

Reggie made no move but asked desperately, "Please listen—"

"No!" Jack was breathing in long, sobbing gasps, looking wildly around as though he expected something to jump out of the shadows. "You've been there, Reggie! You know what it's like. I don't. I'm scared!" He looked at the soft light of the amusement park over the trees. "I want my mother and sister!"

Reggie got to his feet, but Jack was already a good twenty yards away, looking behind him as he stumbled backward. It seemed as though at any moment he might break into a run.

"Don't," Reggie pleaded, but Jack said. "Too late," and then he lurched around and began to run down the winding, perfect pavement toward the front gates.

"Jack!" Reggie shouted, running after him, but it was no use. With long strides, Jack widened the distance between them. At the bottom of the hill, Reggie slowed to a panting halt.

"Momma! Amy . . ." Jack's plaintive voice reached him, and a chill went up Reggie's back.

Something close by shifted, a shadow or the branch of a tree. He spun around to see a looming shape towering above him before it resolved itself into the trunk of a leafless maple. For a moment he thought he saw the two immense eyes that had left him at the gate of the cemetery; they seemed to fly up and pause over the mausoleum before fading into nothingness—but it was only two faint stars pushing their way through the bright sky of the amusement park. I am with you, the eyes had promised, but now they were gone.

A shiver passed over him, and, feeling very alone, he walked back up the hill to stand once more before the cavernous door of the vault.

Within, something heavy crashed to the floor.

He heard soft, cold laughter nearby, through the trees. As though in answer to it, the calliope music grew louder. He did not listen; whatever it called to he had already seen.

There was another crash, metal against concrete, from within the crypt, and the moan of a hurt, despairing animal calling to its maker.

Reggie stepped into the darkness.

A sudden clamp of dread took hold of him, but he shook it off and

took another step forward.

"I know you," he said, but even as he said it, that dread overtook him again. His voice sounded weak in the darkness. His resolve had lessened a fraction; a memory barely hidden in cloud was gnawing at him, forming a small kernel of fear that began to grow. "1 know you," he repeated, but now his voice sounded like that of a hollow man, and for the first time, he was not sure that he knew to whom he spoke.

The walls of the tomb were smooth, as he had imagined they would be; only now they dripped with a sticky substance that smelled like blood, like death-juice. It pumped out of the walls and onto the floor, a flowing mass drawn from some hidden, failing heart. The pools began to merge, covering the floor and washing toward Reggie in a gently rising wave, pool meeting pool to converge on the spot where he stood rooted. Warm blood ran over his shoes, wetting the bottoms of his jeans, lapping warmly at his ankles.

Do you know me? someone—the eyes?—said close by, viciously.

The kernel of fright sought to explode within him. He fought it valiantly, forcing it back to seed. He closed his eyes, and when he opened them, the blood was gone. *Hallucination*, he thought. After a blinking moment of confusion, he took another step, and something sounded from behind him; he looked back to see the dim shape of a huge and bloated thing lowering itself to the floor in the doorway of the vault. Long, tapering legs, many of them, preceded a fat, bulbous body covered with faintly glistening hair: he could almost hear a puff of expelled breath as the huge spider found the floor and began to scuttle toward him. The hairs on Reggie's body stood on end. With a gigantic effort, he closed his eyes for the briefest moment, remembering the dream he had had where he stood in the trench to warn the soldiers that the monstrous, greasy worm advancing on them could not hurt them: "It's only a dream!" When he opened his eyes, the spider, too, was gone.

Bullshit, he thought, *all hallucination.*

He turned to the inner sanctum again. Two heavy stained-glass doors were ajar before him. *Over the ledge,* he thought. *Now I'll know what's over the ledge.*

"I'm not afraid of you," he said, and this time the fear was gone and he believed himself.

He put his hands on the double doors, drawing them back, and suddenly it was there. He was there in the tunnel, with the bright warm light in front of him; he was drifting slowly toward it, toward the figure with the two huge eyes. He could almost see the face, could almost feel himself drawn into those eyes, when he felt the cold clamp of hands on him from behind and he looked back to see the other end of the tunnel, filled with the dark shadow, close behind him, and there

was the grip of cold, spidery hands and a beginning whisper that was suspended on the edge of time

And this time no doctor's hands reached in to pull him back to the world. A merciless fear gripped him as the specter spoke; a pure, unsifted terror filled him, sinking into him like cement.

"Why don't you help me?" he screamed at the huge eyes, but they only regarded him with unblinking calm. "You said you would be with me!"

"Kiss me," the dark serpent's whisper came into his ear.

Death. Here it was at last. Here was the icy, bleak madness, the skin-ripping coldness of it, the bleached-bone, screaming thing itself. *Death*. Here it was, as thick as molasses; it would reach out at him, an octopus, a thing with grasping hands and claws, with suckers to suck the life from him, to draw him to its breast and squeeze the life from the cells of his body and mind. Here it was, sickly sweet and fetid, damper than mold, wetter than thunderous rains: *Death*. It gripped and twisted and bit; it pierced him through the middle, searing him with heat and unbearable sharp burning light.

Death.

"Kiss me," the shadow breathed with rotted breath, bringing its lips to his.

He fell to the floor of the crypt and screamed, throwing his hands over his face. This was what lay beyond that tick of time. The black pit. Nothing. The eyes were not here to help him because they could not. You moved toward the light, and then the blackness caught you from behind, crooning into your ear and biting your body in two. Over the ledge there was a dark, deep hole, infinity in length; the thing kissed you, and down you went. A fear quaked through him greater than any he had ever known or imagined. So it had all been games, all of it: the dreams and the longing to know what lay just beyond. The warmth of those enormous eyes was a false, suckling heat, a diversion, while the real work went on behind, shooting you in the back. . . .

The blackness rose up to encircle him again, to take him finally into its maw—and then suddenly it retreated. He heard a brush of low laughter. "Soon," the voice said, "soon," and he felt the presence, the dark man, move away. He heard an outrush of air and then silence. Shakily he looked up to see the two eyes, the eyes as large as plates, animal's eyes, the eyes of the betrayer, regarding him placidly from the corner of the room.

I am with you. . . .

"Liar!" he screamed, throwing himself forward. He would squeeze those eyes to pools of jelly if he could, but they only moved calmly away from him, hovering like two enormous stars in his heaven.

And then he heard the soft calliope music calling to him, and he knew that whatever immunity he had possessed, whatever privilege these evil eyes had graced him with, was gone.

Come to me, come to me, the calliope called.

He heard the soft, calling whine of an airplane passing overhead, felt the soft, insistent pull, the promise of a long-delayed reunion. . . .

The eyes were gone. He rose unsteadily to his feet and looked into the open casket of the Unknown Man. It was smooth and clean, an empty bronze box. He felt as cold and empty as the casket. Where there had been hope, there was now only dread. It wanted him, and he had to go to it.

He thought of his mother, and of Jack, and of Pup and everyone else in Montvale caught in that bright amusement trap, that thing with claws and tinny music and teeth. It didn't matter anymore; he must go to it. He walked out of the mausoleum, leaving the stained-glass doors ajar, and there it rose before him, the glow of its neons and glass-white bulbs turning the night into a hard outline of low tents, booths and rides. He stared at that simple, hideous skyline, and suddenly he recognized it. Slowly his hand went to his back pocket and he took his wallet out, drew from it a single, carefully folded sheet and opened it, smoothing the creases.

He held it up, comparing it with the outline that dominated Montvale. In the center was the Ferris wheel, corresponding to the black citadel on fire: to the right—where, in the picture, there was a huge open-mouthed coffin into which peasants were being forced by a phalanx of skeletons—stood the House of Fun; to the far left stood the House of Mirrors in place of the crumbling, tree-topped castle with two bell-ringing corpses. There was even a bell—a brass monstrosity with a long, heavy clapper hanging out of it like a dog's tongue—at the summit of the House of Mirrors. In the background were other, less distinct structures, all roughly corresponding to scenes in Breughel's ghastly painting. To the right in the picture stood a gallows, and through the bright lights Reggie thought he saw a vague outline of some such thing poking up beyond the shadow of a tent. And in the far background, partly visible through a whirligig ride and a length of arcade games, was the carousel. From this distance Reggie could barely make it out, but enough was revealed for him to see that it was turning lazily. He heard a faint call, a cry.

The Triumph of Death.

Come to me, come to me.

He began to make his way down the far side of the hill, toward the bright lights in the distance. There was great fear in him, but it was strangely muted by the rocking lullaby of the steam whistle. The paper dropped from his hands, skittering off over the perfectly cut blades of

grass to settle between the crook of a manicured bush and the wall of the mausoleum. It fluttered a few times and then the breeze died, letting it settle quietly to the ground.

FIFTEEN

“Mom, please, Mom."

Jack Gantry had never panicked before, never lost his cool, and here he was doing it in spades. His feet ran without instruction from his mind: they pulled him along so fast that the rest of his body had trouble keeping up. His muscles were so tight he thought he must get a charley horse any minute; but he knew that even if that happened, his legs would keep on running.

"Oh. Mom, Amy."

He knew that Reggie was alone now back there in the cemetery, that one of his best buddies had been deserted, one of the Three Musketeers left behind, but that made no difference to his legs. If he could have seen his own face at this moment, he would have beheld the countenance of a blind person: open, staring eyes and reaching hands. He had never been scared like this before. He had even thought he would grow up to be like his father, a Marine through and through, maybe go to some foreign country, landing on the beach with a "Gung-Ho!" and go screaming up with his rifle at the ready, the way he and Pup and Reggie used to play. He knew there was more to being a Marine than that; his father had sat him down and told him what it really meant, how it "made you a man," but still Jack had thought he'd like to try it. He doubted they'd let him in if they could see him now. *Running away.*

He had never panicked before; when the little McMasters girl had fallen into the skating pond three years before, he had been the first in to get her; he hadn't even thought about the ice, about how thin it must have been, how deep that part of the pond was. That was the same spot where another little kid had drowned while swimming the year before, and even though he knew that, he had gone after the McMasters girl. He'd even enjoyed it in a way. This was what the Marines did, threw themselves into danger without a thought *because it was right,* and they always came out victorious. And he'd saved that kid, finding her arms as they slid smoothly under the ice, his own hand growing instantly numb as he plunged it in. He knew that if he didn't find her in that first instant, he wouldn't find her at all because she was heavily dressed and once all that water got into her coat, she would drop like a stone. He remembered that little hand, the arm from elbow to fingers the only thing left above the cracked blue-white ice, the fingers moving slowly up and down, back and forth, almost calmly searching the air, grasping at the pieces of ice floating around her for something safe to hold on to. And then the arm began to slip, turning slowly, sliding silently underneath the water.

Somewhere behind him, Jack heard Reggie and Pup yelling, and

then he felt the ice beneath his own crawling belly begin to soften and collapse. He felt a cold rush of water cover his front, but his hand went down into that cold numbness, and he calmly moved it around. It moved against something solid and then lost touch; quickly he plunged his arm deeper, and there she was. He grabbed her by the arm, at the exact point where her elbow had been visible above the water line, and began to haul up. Only then did he realize that the entire top half of his body was nearly underwater and that he was skimming forward into the dark hole. Carefully he tried to snake backward, moving his legs from side to side and digging his boots into the mushy ice behind him, but it was no good. He was gliding down, and soon he would be under the ice and too cold and wet to get out.

But then there were hands on his boots, pulling him back, and he glanced behind to see Reggie and Pup, their faces strained, the sky cobalt blue over them, and the skeletons of a few gray-black trees at the edge of the pond making the scene suddenly beautiful, and then they had him on firm ice and they had the girl from his arms. There were other people there, and the girl's father came running and screaming across the snowy field next to the pond, along with a couple of other men, farmhands, and they were working on the girl and getting the water out of her lungs and then bundling her up when she began to cough. They carried her away.

No one had bothered with him for those few minutes while they were bringing the girl around; but he didn't mind because he laid still, the cold not yet into his bones, and just stared at the perfect blue sky and the silver branch of a tree that arched overhead. He had never felt so alive, had never before thought about being alive, and his whole body tingled with the strain of mere existence.

"Jack?" someone said finally.

It was Reggie; his face came into view, partially blocking out the blue sky. There was a worried frown on his face. "You okay?"

"Sure."

"You okay?" Pup's face came into view, and he reached down a thickly coated arm to help him up. -Just let me stay here a minute."

Pup looked at Reggie, and then Reggie said, "Don't move, Jack." The next thing he remembered was being lifted by strong hands, being slid into a warm bed under quilts and a doctor peering down at him through huge bottleneck glasses, all of this remembered in a half-sleepy way, and when he awoke, he found that he had been asleep for almost two days.

This came back to him now; especially the part about lying on the ground and just staring at the sky. Nothing like that had ever happened to him again, and sometimes when he thought about it, he felt as if it might have been a dream.

And until this moment, until this naked fear had gripped him, he had never felt anything so intensely.

"Mom! Amy!"

The lights of the amusement park gleamed before him, and a panic greater than the others seized him. Suddenly he desperately wanted to see his mother and sister. He wanted to bury his face in his mother's breast and weep, wanted her soft hands to encircle him and hold tight. "It's all right, Jack," he wanted her to say, the way she had when he was little and hurt himself, before the car accident that killed her and Amy. He didn't even know if he wanted to be a Marine anymore.

He ran through the open gates of the amusement park, nearly weeping. His mind was a jumble of confused thoughts and memories. He wanted to be somewhere safe.

He ran past a red-and-white ticket booth with a "Closed" sign slid down over the small window. He thought he heard distant shouts but couldn't be sure. He rushed on blindly; the shouting got stronger on his right and then, momentarily, on his left, and then subsided into background noise again. There were open tents to either side of him. A hot-dog stand displayed a slowly spinning wheel of cooked wieners and a tall, crooked stack of salted pretzels. He passed a cluster of kiddie rides; most of them were silent, but one, a long caterpillar that curled around on itself, was just starting to move. There were a few glassy-eyed children and one or two adults aboard, and as the ride began, a tarp curled over the caterpillar and covered the riders. As Jack ran on, he heard a yell building.

He passed under the huge Ferris wheel and into another maze of tents. There were a few small buildings beyond that, a Fun-House entrance and a Bumper-Car arena, and then he was at the wrought-iron fence of the amusement park.

He hit the bars and gripped them hard. He sank to his knees, crying, balling his hands and rubbing his eyes with his fists. He hadn't outrun the fear. It was still all around him, in the whole town, the whole cemetery, the whole amusement park. He called for his mother again, thinking that he wouldn't move until she came to get him, to pick him up and hold him against her. If his father came, he would stand up straight and try to be a man; otherwise, he wouldn't move.

A voice called his name, but it was neither his mother nor father nor sister, so he didn't look up. He was afraid it was Reggie, and that made him cry even louder, out of guilt.

"Jack, open your eyes."

He knew the voice, but he wouldn't open his eyes. Who was it? Reggie? No. It was someone he knew, a friend, but how good a friend? Was it someone he could trust?

"Jack, remember the Three Musketeers."

Now he knew the voice. Something loosened, some screw that had been tightened all the way, and he began to breathe and really think again. He opened his eyes.

"Pup!"

The word came out in a gasp of relief. If Pup was here, maybe everything was all right. Pup, the lost Musketeer. He couldn't face Reggie again, but with Pup here, maybe the fear would go away. He and Reggie had given Pup up for lost, and here he was, right in the middle of the fear, grinning down at Jack with those all-so-bright, mischievous eyes.

"What's going on, Pup?"

"Plenty."

Pup turned away with a grunt, surveying with quick eyes the amusement park behind them. Faint sounds could be heard, shouts and the groaning of rides and, far off, something that sounded like weeping and someone saying the name "Bobby?" over and over again, all whipped away by a breath of wind.

"You seen my mom and sister?" Jack asked, getting to his feet unsteadily. His whole body ached.

Pup spoke distractedly. He was looking off between the tents, searching for something. "They're around somewhere."

Jack stretched, feeling almost normal again. He thought of the running he had done, and about having left Reggie alone, and a true remorse took hold of him; he wondered why he had run, what had possessed him.

"We've got to go help Reggie, Pup."

"Hmm?"

"I left Reggie in the churchyard by the tomb." Pup's head swung around. "Is Reggie coming here?"

"I don't know, Pup. I left him there alone. He really scared me good, more than those stories he used to tell." Jack lowered his head. "I ran off and left him."

Pup nodded vaguely, searching the alleyways around them.

"You've got to come with me, Pup!" Jack took a few steps away from the fence.

"I don't think so."

Jack stared at his friend, confusion beginning to fill his head again. "What about the Three Musketeers, Pup?" He held out his closed fist for Pup to place his own on top.

Pup ignored the gesture. "We're going to have to disband the Three Musketeers."

Pup was smiling. His eyes had stopped wandering and were fixed on a point directly behind Jack's head. Jack's neck felt very cold, as if threads were being drawn across it.

You do it.

The words hung in the air. Jack looked around quickly to see something dark moving away, beyond the wrought-iron bars.

"Who was that—" he began.

"Someone's here for you," Pup said. His voice sounded happy.

Jack turned to see his mother and sister standing there quietly, looking at him. He took a step toward them, but Pup's hand was on him, holding him back.

"No more Three Musketeers," Pup said. When Jack looked again, his mother and sister were gone. The iron fence had disappeared. The night was gone, too, replaced by a red twilight, as if fires burned just over the horizon. The boys stood on a black beach. Slow waves lapped at the shore, making sucking sounds as they pulled out again. The tide was very low. There was a thin layer of oozy mud between the dark sand and the oily, viscous water. A strip of land was just visible in the distance; it swung out from the left into the channel. In the bay there was a small island with a tower or lighthouse on it. To the right of the structure there appeared to be a shipwreck.

The scene looked vaguely familiar.

"Hear that, Jack?" Pup said, suddenly anxious, and Jack walked down to stand beside him on the beach. He barely detected a faint cry coming from the sinking, wrecked ship. From this distance he could just hear the grind of the smashed wood as the vessel was slowly pulled beneath the water.

"Someone's drowning!" Pup said.

Fear gripped Jack again, as it had in the churchyard. He was immobile. He knew now that he could never become a Marine, could never measure up to what his father wanted of him. He didn't have it, after all. He had had it once, when he had saved that little girl in the pond, but that had been a fluke, a one-time thing where his body had acted before his chicken's head could talk him out of it. Here it was, happening again, and he was frozen. His head wouldn't let his body do the job. He was chicken shit, and that was that.

"She's dying, Jack. Can't you hear her?" Pup's voice was frantic.

Jack sobbed.

"Come on, we'll save her together, Marine."

Pup began to take off his trousers and shoes, pulling his shirt quickly over his head. His body was heavy and white but firm, leaner than Jack had remembered from their swimming days earlier in the summer. Pup stripped down to his shorts, pulling his socks off and throwing them on top of the rest of his clothes.

"Jack—snap out of it!"

They could clearly hear the pleas for help now, pitiful, desperate. Suddenly Jack pulled his jeans off, blocking the fear from his mind.

What sounded like a last shriek came from the sinking ship, and this was enough to spur him on; he ran for the shoreline, not even noticing if Pup was with him or not, and dove in.

The water was cloudy, and the bottom was a layer of sticky mud that tried to anchor his feet, but he kicked free of it and struck out for the center of the bay. The aches had disappeared from his body, and he felt powerful. There were no waves to fight; the water was calm but hard to swim in, as if filmed with motor oil. He heard splashing beside him and glanced over to see Pup's thick frame moving with effort a few yards back. The sight of his friend banished the last doubts from his mind, and his arms threw him ahead.

The upturned bow of the sinking vessel loomed in front of him. Now he heard the wood grinding and the slap of water against the ruined hull. It was slipping down into the water quickly and would soon be submerged.

Pulling to a stop, Jack sought in vain for the figure that had uttered the cry for help. With a sinking feeling, he realized that she must have already been pulled beneath the water. Pushing himself under the surface, he searched for anything that looked like a human figure, but the mixture of bad light and the sootiness of the water prevented him from seeing anything. He moved a bit closer to the ship, taking care not to be sucked into the undertow; again he dove but saw nothing. He was about to surface when a flash of light caught his eye. Drifting closer, he saw a roll of yellow fabric and two thin, kicking legs, the feet in black pumps, disappearing into the sinking hold of the ship. He rose for air, gulping.

He drove himself underwater again, kicking downward till the deck of the ship clearly came into sight. A wooden door flapped lazily in the water. He darted toward the opening, grabbing either side of the frame. He peered in, seeing only water-soaked objects—a chair drifting by as if it were weightless, a coffeepot, a chart with the pen still attached by its snakelike cord. Then the figure of a young girl became visible in the murky light: a tuft of short yellow party dress, bare legs and black party pumps with short white socks. A tangle of dirty blonde hair trailed behind her head. He could not see her face because she was swimming or drifting away from him, down through another doorway that stood ajar at an angle like a fun-house portal.

He became aware of a hunger for air, a sign that he would have to surface soon. He pushed forward, off the lopsided wall, and made a grab for the girl's foot as she disappeared into the other room. The tips of his fingers caught at her heel and then let go. At that moment, as her movement carried her away from him, she looked back, and he was able to see her face. With a shock he realized that it was the McMasters girl, the one he had saved in the pond. She was a few years

older but still the little girl he remembered. The look of pleading and recognition on her face seemed all too familiar.

Her mouth formed the word, "Help."

Maybe I'll be a Marine yet.

There was a burning ache beginning in his chest; he ignored it and pulled himself into the room after the girl. It was even darker in here; his arm hit something as he entered and he pushed himself away from a chest of some kind that was floating free by the doorway. He could not see the girl. He looked around wildly, an insistent hot hunger in his lungs now, but saw her nowhere. Then, in the far corner, there was a flash of blonde in the darkness, and a small hand came into view, held out to him. He snatched at her arm, knowing that if he did not do this quickly, both of them would be lost. He held onto it, but as he pulled her toward him, there was a horrifying pull at her from the other side, as if some huge sea creature had attached itself to her. Before Jack knew what was happening, he was following her through a hole in what had once been the floor. He felt the girl's hand clutch at him in panic, her small nails digging into his arm, preventing him from letting go.

His chest felt as if it was on fire; he was surrounded by cold water, but he was burning up. His eyes ached. He and the girl went down and down. Things he could barely see passed him: a lamp, floating like a strange industrial fish; a pair of shoes, laces tied; a large envelope with the words "First Class" on it in big red letters, the gummed ends coming apart in the water. He tried to pull free, but the girl's grip was too strong.

As they passed through another doorway, Jack threw himself sideways, jamming his legs painfully against the door, and the downward pull stopped. He battled for the girl: the thing on the other side of her pulled with equal strength, but he held his ground. There was lava in his lungs, and he knew that in a few moments he would breathe water and die.

He gave a mighty pull on the girl's arm, and the thing on the other end let go. Immediately Jack turned and began to swim upward wildly. The same objects, in slightly different positions, went by: the envelope breaking apart, the shoes, the lamp settling against a wall and bobbing slightly—and then he was into the top room, then past the hold and onto the deck. The girl's clutch on him was tighter than ever, which told him that she was still alive.

He could make out the surface above him. The ship had submerged completely, and he judged he had about forty feet to go to reach the waterline. He kicked out furiously, disregarding the pain that had spread from his chest to his entire torso, filling him with lead.

The movement of the upside-down waves was a scant five feet above him when the girl's grip turned to sudden metal, seeming to tear through his skin to the blood and bone beneath. He stopped dead. The thing that had held her had followed them. He strained upward: the surface was just above him, the green, oily breakers mere inches from his hungry mouth. He could almost taste the air, could feel it up there, moving in slow currents yet an eternity away. He clawed like a wild man at the girl's arm, thrashing in the water, trying to make her let go, but her hand was an iron vise. Her face was turned away from him. He thought he saw something black behind her, something huge flowing like a manta ray, with small red eyes in a white face—

And then his lungs exploded. The girl turned to him, turned her face slowly toward him as if it were on a revolving turntable. He looked into it as she let go of him. She was smiling, breathing in and out, gulping water like a fish. It was Pup's face on the girl's body, long, dirty-blonde hair flowing away from his scalp.

Jack's lungs burst. He heard Pup say, "Never be a Marine now, Jack." He was dying, but he heard Pup continue: “You just weren't cut out for it. Remember that McMasters girl? Don't worry, she's still down there in that ship. Just wanted you to know you didn't save her after all. I hated that girl because of what you did for her. You saved her that day, and you got all the attention, not me. Just because you thought you wanted to be a Marine, you moved faster than your head told you to. Just because you didn't think. Well, I thought, and I pulled you out of that ice, but they only wanted to worry about you and say what a fine boy you were.

"I wanted to push that McMasters girl back into that hole and close it over with snow and ice and watch her beat on the bottom of the ice, looking up at me, looking for air pockets, for a way to get out. I couldn't do that then, but I'm doing it now, Marine."

There was a vicious hatred in Pup's voice: deep, mad, visceral hatred.

"Good-bye, Jack," Pup went on, although Jack could no longer hear him. There was triumph and rage in Pup's voice. "You'll never be a Marine now."

Pup looked up at the stiff, silent faces of Jack's mother and sister and then down at the drowned, bloated body that lay slumped against the fence of the amusement park.

"Say good-bye to everybody, Jack," he said. His eyes wandered up over the lights toward the spot where the church tower next to the cemetery vied for prominence with the height of the Ferris wheel and lost. "Say good-bye to the Three Musketeers."

SIXTEEN

As Reggie stumbled through the phalanx of trees at the edge of the churchyard, something melted out of the night in front of him.

A hooded shape appeared off to one side, close against a tree, hunched over as if trying to become part of the tree itself. As Reggie got closer, he saw that that figure was not hunched over at all but was rising out of the ground by the base of the tree. He stopped. He tasted something strong and bitter, and a bolt of fear went through him. The black shape drew itself out of the ground and stood silent beside the tree. It took a step toward him.

Reggie broke into a run, trying to throw himself past it. *No,* he thought, *no!* His mind was a jumble of mindless despair; the amusement park still called to him—*Come to me! Come to me!*—and he sought to follow its pull.

The shape, all arms and huge hands, leaped at him.

Reggie felt its fingers, cold and hard, tighten around him. He was pulled to the ground. He closed his eyes, willing himself not to look at the specter. No! He thrashed out with his arms and legs, trying to kick the thing away, and felt his hands pummel something soft and hollow, not a human breast but something cool and pliable, as if the skin was loosely wrapped on a rattling frame. The shape grunted at his blows but held firmly.

Slowly Reggie was dragged toward the tree. He tried to scrabble away, digging his fingers into the closely cropped grass at the curb of the cemetery drive, but the earth gave way in soft clumps. He looked beyond his captor, which had its head bowed against its chest as it tugged backward, and he saw a yawning pit, roughly dug, at the base of the tree.

With a weak grunt, the figure dropped over the edge of the freshly dug grave, carrying Reggie with him. Reggie cried out and began to rain blows upon it with his fists. Their battle was a quiet, desperate one: the figure, crablike, pulling him inch by inch into the hole and Reggie seeking to haul himself out. When he saw the lip of the hole disappear above him, he put his knee into the thing's groin, but this had no effect. Its arms were locked around him, its face buried against him. Reggie gouged at its head, trying to make it let go. His fingers sank into cool, dry flesh, down to smoothness that felt like bone.

"Oh. Jesus!" Reggie cried out, realizing that it was bone, a glossy length of it along an eye socket, that he was feeling.

Without warning, the figure released him and fell lengthwise into the hole.

Reggie levered himself over the top of the hole with his elbows. The thing grabbed at his legs, locking its arms around them and trying

to pull him back. Reggie kicked free but lost his hold on the soft dirt around the grave and slipped down. The cold, papery thing was on him like a spider. Reggie pushed him-self up from its chest and tried to get to his feet, but the figure clutched him around the shoulders and the neck and pulled him down yet again. Reggie beat at it fiercely, trying to make it let go for good. The thing was gradually pulling his face close to its own inch by inch. Reggie noticed a dry, rotting smell, with a clean bone odor underneath it, like ammonia.

He yelled desperately. The thing answered him with a grunt of stale air.

Reggie shifted position, jamming his face against the parchment-like skin of the creature as he reached around to force the other's hands from his neck. He squirmed violently, pulling at the creature's wrists, and with a great effort, he made it let go. He threw himself to his knees, and then heaved himself to his feet as the other, in a final attempt, whipped itself up and grabbed him, folding its arms tightly around his neck in a strangling embrace.

"I don't want to die!" Reggie screamed, remembering the thing in the tunnel, the dark, cold fall over the precipice. He felt the cold thud of a clod of earth on his back and knew that the hole was being filled with dirt.

"Cover me," the figure panted hoarsely in his ear.

"Let me go! Oh, God!" Reggie's palms beat uselessly at the thing that held him.

The creature shivered.

"Co . . . ver . . . me," it gasped again. All at once it lost its strength. Its arms became loose around Reggie's neck and then fell away limply.

For a moment Reggie could not move. Then, breathing heavily, he pulled himself off the thing, which lay helplessly under him.

A sprinkle of earth fell from his back. The hole was not being filled as he had feared: some dirt had merely been loosened in the struggle and fallen on top of them.

". . . cover . . .” the specter panted.

Now Reggie looked at the thing's face and saw that it was one he knew: the black zombie he had seen outside his window.

The man in the hole reached up to Reggie, but his hand fell impotently to strike the ground. There was a horrible gash in his face, around the left eye an open tear that should have been bleeding but was not. With a shudder Reggie recalled the feel of bone on his fingers.

The man opened his mouth and wailed. His entire frame wracked with the force of his lament. He tried to cover his face and curl up into a ball.

"Cover me! Cover me!"

Reggie stood up.

"Please cover me! Let me go back!"

The figure stopped bucking and lay silent. It moaned dryly, pressing its hands to its face. It again reached for Reggie, trying to grab his legs, but just as quickly, the arms fell back.

Reggie thought the man was dead, but then he moved, lifted his hands and slowly sat up. Reggie climbed out of the hole, putting a couple of yards between himself and the dark shape.

"You're not him," the man said in a flat, hollow voice. He stood up in the grave and regarded Reggie with an even, sad look. As he spoke, he seemed to change into something more erect and human; the trembling creature with spider hands was gone, and in its place stood a tall man with a calm, troubled gaze. His eyes looked half at this world and half at some other place, some terrible plane of existence that wanted to turn him into the crawling, scraping, begging thing again. Now he looked much more like the man Reggie had first seen at his bedroom window, though without the startled, desperate look he had worn then.

"You aren't him," the man said, coming close to Reggie and placing his hands on Reggie's shoulders. Reggie backed away.

"Tell me who you are," Reggie said to the black man, no longer terrified of him. In the back of his mind, the calliope still beckoned. . . .

"I've waited," the man said, ignoring Reggie's question. "I dug this hole with my own hands and waited." He held up his hands to the light from the amusement park, and Reggie saw not bloody stumps, but rounded, stunted fingers ending in frayed rags of flesh and knobs of white bone. "I waited, but he wouldn't stop for me."

When Reggie opened his mouth to speak, the specter cut him off.

"I pleaded with him to stop!" He backed up a few stumbling steps, landing with a thud in the grave and collapsing into a sitting position, wrapping his arms around his knees; he shook like a leaf in a cold, wet wind. "I put dirt in my mouth, I tried to drown myself in a rain pond, I ran in front of a machine"—he threw one hand out and laced it from one side to the other, stopping it in an abrupt fist as if it had hit something—"but he would not take me!" The man waved his arms, indicating the open cavities around him. "Every one of these graves I lay in, and I waited, but nothing came for me."

Once again he climbed out of the hole. His voice was soft, full of weariness. "Jeff Scott told me I would grow used to this, but I cannot. He was my friend, a true friend. But Jeff Scott was consumed by hate and is not the same man, and this is not the same time. This isn't any time at all. We didn't have machines where I came from, and here they have machines for everything. Jeff Scott seems used to all the

machines. This is the judgment day, if ever there will be one. Flames. . ." He looked down at Reggie, peering closely into the boy's face until sudden awe filled his voice. The boy in my dream. I saw you through a window, in a house filled with machines. You're—"

"Reggie Carson."

"Lord. . . ." The man threw his tattered hands to his head and stood motionless. He looked as though he were reaching for something far away. After a while he brought his hands down to his sides.

"I am your great-grandfather, boy."

Lucius walked away from the hole, out into the middle of the roadway. All vestiges of his mad behavior were gone. His ghoulish face had taken on expression, almost life, and his eyes were filled with something that looked like bright excitement.

"Why did you come here'?" he asked.

Reggie didn't answer. He thought of the short black ledge, the screaming fall into nothingness and death, he thought of dim and half-forgotten stories told to him on his father's knee or while under warm blankets, stories of his family fleeing from some untold thing, returning years later with a new name to the town that had changed, hoping to forget; he thought of the man standing before him, the rotting man who claimed to be part of those stories and claimed to want more than anything to fall back over that ledge into that horrid, bottomless pit, to *kiss* the shadow man and be brought to cold annihilation and death; he thought of his mother, his friends, of that whistling secret machine that called him inevitably to other meetings, pulling him from the front, pushing him from behind, and of things he could not now avoid. . . .

"We must go to Jeff Scott," the old man said. "You're the one who can save him." A tremor passed through him, a tremor that Reggie felt too. A cold hand on his shoulder, a whisper in his ear.

"We must go now." Stiffly, Lucius walked.

Reggie looked back at the soft slope of the churchyard, at the wide-open mouth of the Tomb of the Unknown Man, at the empty dirt mouths in the ground.

Come to me, come to me, kiss me. . . .

The old man was far ahead of him now, outlined against the artificial lights in front of him, a tall stick figure rattling like a bag of ivory bones. And then Reggie was beside him.

SEVENTEEN

In his wooden cabin, Jeff Scott raged and flailed, weeping and beating at the walls. *Frankenstein's monster*, he thought, *in the pit of fire.* His body was both hot and cold, one side burning flesh, the other side cold, hard bone. He jammed his hands, one skeletal, the other flesh, to his ears, but could not block out the screaming outside the trailer. Jeff Scott was two men now, melded at an invisible line down his middle. And as his body was divided, so was his mind—one part cool, rational and cynical, the other shrieking in red, growing rage. Ash had laughed at him because he knew the truth. Jeff had been a fool all along; he had spent all these long years avoiding the truth, burying it so deep inside that it took this moment to make him face it squarely.

Did I really hate that much? he asked himself.

He knew that he had, because the hate, screwed so deep into him, had finally, fully, wormed its way to the surface and burst. He felt it again as he had at that moment when the rope went taut around his neck, when the knot at the back tightened like the grip of a hand, in an instant cutting the life from his body. It all came back to him, and though he fought it, he knew it was winning. He was turning into a raging animal, wanting life, wanting revenge.

You'll all die! his mind had screamed. *I'll kill all of you.*

The moment of Poundridge's death had brought it back. When the sad, thin, pleading man had dropped through the floor of the gallows—his feet kicking in bursts at the emptiness around him, looking for a place to set down but finding none: his arms, tied behind, slapping viciously against his back; his body desperate to break free and find his lungs the air they needed—at that instant it had all rushed back at him. The face then had been that other Poundridge's face, grinning up at him, fat, confident—and here was this same man, with his hands against his will on the lever, pulling it and hanging his own great-great-great grandson.

Jeff Scott had wanted to cry at that moment, to throw himself on the ground and beg whoever there might be for forgiveness, to forgive him for wanting this, but that hadn't happened. Instead, the hate, the red raw hate, had roiled up, and to his horror, he had started to laugh. Poundridge was still thrashing on the end of the cord, gagging and wetting himself, his face red and wild and, through all the choking and kicking, still *pleading*, and Jeff Scott had *laughed*. He had turned to see Ash regarding him in the artificial light; Ash's mouth was spread like a sickle, his dull, dark eyes crinkled at the corners. Then Ash suddenly turned toward Poundridge, and at that moment, as Poundridge stopped struggling, when his body went tight and then

loosened, there was an audible "Ah" from Ash that was more ghastly than anything Jeff Scott had yet heard. Ash's frame went taut and then relaxed in an almost sexual release. He began to laugh, wracking with it, great hoarse cries coming from that slit of a mouth, and then Jeff Scott was able to fall to the ground, beating his fists upon it, his fist of flesh and his fist of bone, trying to stop himself from laughing, turning his laughter into sobs.

At last he rose and stumbled away. He heard Ash's voice behind him, calling him back, but he walked on. Ash's hand fell on his shoulder, a hand that seemed to melt right through his bones, gripping the marrow within them.

"It's started," Ash crooned, barely suppressing his excitement.

Jeff Scott tried to walk on.

Ash's grip stopped him, forced him to the ground. His voice was a snake's hiss.

"Don't even *think* about anything else; this is yours, and you'll have it." He softened his tone. "Look at me." His hand was turning Jeff toward him, and Jeff closed his eyes.

"Let me go."

He felt his body turning, felt the rustle of Ash's short coat and smelled his sour, smoky breath near his face. He did not open his eyes. There was a whisper of cool air, and he felt the cloak enfold him like a butterfly's wings. The world turned icy and then hot. His hate crawled from the depths to scream into his head, and as Ash's body pressed closer to his, as the white face dropped nearer to his face, the red lips to his lips, Jeff Scott felt the rest he so desired coming on him.

There was hate, and then there would be rest. "Kiss me," Ash breathed. His lips, iced metal, brushed across Jeff Scott's own, and Ash's hands tightened around him in a lover's embrace, his mouth beginning to feed

Jeff Scott screamed and pushed Ash away. He caught him off balance and broke free. There was a last pinch of Ash's claw-like hand on his shoulder, and then he was running blindly.

"There's nowhere for you to go," Ash said evenly. Jeff Scott nearly ran into a light pole. He pushed himself off it and stumbled on. He passed into sudden light, found himself on the midway. A few rides moved laconically: everywhere he turned, there were small clusters of people. Always with these groups there was one stiff, slow figure, man, woman or child, eyes flat and glassy, limbs without energy, bearing the limp smiles of the dead

You'll all die, he thought, looking at the quiet, happy faces that surrounded these ghouls, the joy of unexpected reunion in their eyes. Sorrow and then great hatred welled up in him. "You'll see me soon enough!" he screamed at them, and they turned toward him, and then

quickly looked away. He sobbed and ran on, holding his hands out before him, trying to push the welling, bloated hatred away from him before it consumed him whole.

You'll all die.

He passed others who were going into some of the attractions. He wanted to shout at them to get away, to run, not to go in, but he could not. There was too much of him that wanted them where they were. Ahead of him loomed the mouth of the Tunnel of Fun. A somber, pale porter was just pulling aside the tasseled rope at the head of the line, and passengers were boarding the small, tracked cars that would wheel them inside. *Like cattle.* Pale specters accompanied each of them, and the riders chattered happily to these silent spooks, occasionally touching or patting them. Kill you all, Jeff's mind shouted, but he squeezed his eyes shut, and the words did not reach his lips. The ride attendant looked up at him, eyes silent and white, like stones. The pupils were too small, with too little life in them.

Release me, those eyes begged him.

Jeff ran on.

There were people everywhere now. He passed under the Ferris wheel, each car full. The lights ringing its perimeter blinked gaily. The carousel was nearly filled, each enameled horse carrying a rider strapped tightly by a leather thong. Pallid attendants were in evidence everywhere, the dead of Montvale, helping passengers and handing out tickets and running the food stands and game tents. The steam organ sent bouncy, tinkly music into every corner of the amusement park. The lights grew brighter. There were clowns and jugglers too, milling among the crowd and showing off their somber skills; the balls the jugglers handled seemed hypnotic, brightly painted. The clowns' eyes were waxy and bloodless, and they all turned the same look on Jeff Scott as he passed:

Release me.

Jeff Scott found the door to his trailer and staggered through it.

How could I do this? he agonized, and immediately another thought overtook the first: *I'll kill you all.*

He started to tear up the room, pulling over the Spartan bed, ripping the lone shelf from the wall. The few books, the volumes of Hawthorne and Mark Twain, Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*, and the Bible, tumbled to the floor. He picked up the Bible, holding it out before him, and then, with a wail, he threw it against the wall. He felt a sudden urge to rip every page out and burn them, to burn the ashes and then beat the pile left with his fists. He tore out the pages of the other books and then pulled the drawers from the dresser, smashing the wood against the walls and picking the pieces up and breaking them further with his hands. He threw himself at the wall and looked

up to see his face in the mirror.

He howled like an animal. *I'm not Frankenstein,* he thought; and then: *I'm not anything at all.* A burning, bottomless pain seared through him; it was like being on a roller coaster and having the first drop take your stomach from you, only now it was his being that dropped out of him. *I'm nothing.* He stared at the fleshy side of his face, and at the bone side. He grinned, and wanted to moan at the horror of his grinning: the smile he had always known, had studied in the mirror when he was young to see whether the young ladies would like it, on one side; and then, beginning at the center of his face, the white, smooth, tooth-pierced grin of a Halloween skeleton.

I'll kill them all. Yes.

He thought of the sick, almost wet, sound of his neck snapping, the futile, desperate kick of his body against the rope. A thrill ran through him from his head to his legs. He thought of Ash, of the erotic twinge that had bolted through him when Poundridge had died.

No!

Yes, I'll kill them all.

He pushed away from the mirror and dropped to the floor. He brought one hand slowly up to the good side of his face, feeling the soft, cool line that ran along his nose and down to his chin. He forced his shaking hand through his hair, feeling the familiar wave of it, the part, the partial cowlick at the back. This was his hair, his nose and mouth, his face.

You're still you.

He began to breathe easier. He brought himself into a sitting position. A ripped-out portion of a book lay open in front of him. He picked it up. It was a section of *Huckleberry Finn*, including the front page. On it was Twain's warning that anyone looking for a moral in the book would be shot. He nearly smiled, remembering the first time he had read the book, in a library in another town about a month after he had found himself on that road by the churchyard, standing beside his open grave-hole. The book had been written in the 1880s, almost twenty years after his death, but it brought back memories. It was the kind of book his father and brother would have liked. He had wandered into the library out of the rain. The book had been open on a return cart, the title page showing stately typeface, and across from it there was a picture of a boy and a black man on a raft, the boy with a corncob pipe in his mouth. Jeff had been drawn to it because he had made a corncob pipe for himself every once in a while when his father wasn't looking; he had liked to sneak a smoke with one of his friends or with Petey Graham, who always had tobacco.

He had taken the volume quietly from the cart and settled himself in one of the deep chairs in the periodical room at the back of the

library. He had soon become lost in it.

Before he knew it, someone was leaning over him, breaking him out of his reverie and telling him that the library was closing. "You can take the book out if you like," she had said, smiling at his obvious fascination.

He had mumbled about not having a library card, and her face had clouded.

"That's too bad," she had said, then, “Wait here a minute."

He had watched her disappear into one of the other rooms. The lights had gone off, row on row, leaving only his area still lit. He had thought for a moment that she was going to lock him in the library over-night, which would have been fine with him, but she reappeared a moment later.

"You can have this one,” she had said, handing him a tattered copy of the same book he had been reading. "It was in the storeroom. Normally we'd end up throwing it out because it's falling apart."

He had thanked her, noticing that she was young and pretty. She had smiled; she seemed to want him to say more. With a shock, he realized that she was interested in him, maybe even wanted to start something with him. There was a look in her eyes—not flirtatious, but open, curious.

Embarrassed, he had thanked her again and awkwardly left.

And here was that same copy, torn to pieces at his feet, the symbol of his impotence and his end. But the fact was that he had read and loved this book, had reread it four or five times, and he knew there must be something to him, something real and solid, because it was a book written twenty years after he had died.

Within him, the hate was diminishing. He felt it shrink to a small, hard stone. He got to his feet and went to the crooked mirror; he stood close to it and looked hard at the reflection it sent back. Half-man, half-bone, but suddenly it made no difference. He smiled at the reflection, and this time he felt only himself smile back.

I'm still Jeff Scott. Maybe he would be free of Ash.

He heard someone flip the pages of a book behind him, and when he turned around, Ash was standing there, filling the doorway.

"There's an interesting passage in this Twain book," Ash said. "Perhaps I could read it to you." He held up a torn page in mock lecture. " ‘He chased me round and round the place with a clasp-knife, calling me the Angel of Death, and saying he would kill me, and then I couldn't come for him no more. I begged, and told him I was only Huck; but he laughed *such* a screechy laugh, and roared and cussed, and kept on chasing me up. Once when I turned short and dodged under his arm he made a grab and got me by the jacket between my shoulders, and I thought I was gone; but I slid out of the jacket quick

as lightning, and saved myself. Pretty soon he was all tired out, and dropped down with his back against the door, and said he would rest a minute and then kill me. He put his knife under him, and said he would sleep and get strong, and then he would see who was who.' "

Ash looked up, letting the page spin to the floor like a dropping leaf. He took a long time to light one of his black cigarettes. Drawing on it, he regarded Jeff Scott evenly, as an entomologist might regard a bug that had escaped him, with determination to catch it again. He pulled on his cigarette two or three more times, holding the smoke in before leisurely pushing it out.

"I guess we'll see who was who."

"I'm leaving, Ash."

Ash seemed unsurprised. "And where will you go?"

"Anywhere. Away from the hate."

Ash lit another cigarette, even more deliberately than the first. For a chilling moment it occurred to Jeff Scott that Ash was trying to drag the moment out, to savor it.

"I think," Ash said, again drawing deeply on his cigarette, and pausing before completing his sentence, "that Mr. Jeff Scott has made a discovery. He has discovered that he no longer holds within him that great and constant hatred that he believes has made all of this glorious enterprise possible. He thinks that through an act of his own will, the will of a dead man, he has banished this hatred from himself. Am I right?"

"I won't help you anymore. There's nothing left in me for you to feed on."

Ash shook his head and stepped forward. An unaccountable coldness came into Jeff Scott, a coldness he had never known even when he had been in the ground, covered with cold earth. He dropped to his knees, holding his middle.

"Get up," Ash said casually. He touched Jeff under the chin, bringing him painfully to his feet. Jeff felt himself propelled backward and down into the single wooden chair left whole in the room. He bent over double again, trying to warm himself with hands as cold as ice.

"Oh . . . " he moaned.

"How wrong we can be," Ash said in that same nonchalant tone. "Even in death, human egos continue to prosper. Do I look unwell to you'? Do I?" He pulled Jeff Scott's chin up, forcing him to look into his full, white face. "Don't I look as well as always, or better, even though your precious power has been taken from me? How is it that I look so fit if the only thing that kept me in existence was your puny hatred? Tell me!"

"Oh . . ." Jeff moaned.

Ash released Jeff and paced the room. In the doorway behind him, Jeff saw two other figures. Through his haze of cold pain he could not make them out. "How foolish you have been. Your hatred kept only you going. But *me*? Let me assure you, there's plenty of hate to go around, enough to continue the work here and elsewhere."

The pain in Jeff's gut slackened. He distinguished the figures in the doorway: a tall, sallow woman with short-cropped hair and glazed eyes, and a slightly overweight boy of thirteen or fourteen with the look about him of a sly animal. The boy was especially alert, his small pebble eyes following Ash's every movement.

"I . . . still say . . . you're . . . afraid of something . . ." Jeff said.

The pain grew again, and the figures receded into a teary mist. Only Ash's face was there before him now, in sharp outline.

"Are you quite sure," Ash's face asked, "that your hate is gone?"

Jeff found nothing but cold inside him. "Yes," he got out painfully.

The thin lips parted, moving down on him.

With his cold hands, Jeff Scott tried to push Ash away. His hands melted into Ash's coat. There was nothing inside—no body or bones, nothing. When Jeff tried to remove his hands, they would not come out, but only sank farther in. Ash's face moved closer, the razor-red lips dusting his cheek, his chin, then finding his mouth. A scream formed deep down in the coldness, but Jeff Scott could not bring it to life.

Ash's mouth opened wide. Then it opened wider, became all, and Ash demanded of him, using the two words Jeff Scott had so long feared and hoped to hear.

EIGHTEEN

Death.

It was liquid in the mist that settled on his skin, gaseous in the air that went into his nostrils, solid in the ground beneath his feet. Death was an envelope; it surrounded him and tried to get in at him through his pores, his eyes, his skin, his mouth. He tasted death when his lips parted. With each step he took, he had to kick it aside, push it back with his fingers, drive it away with his head. Death had become concrete, tar and paper, and board and paint; had subsumed the atmosphere and the sacred, walked-upon earth itself.

Death wanted him.

Ahead of Reggie Carson, the old black man hobbled like a broken broom. From the cemetery to the gates of the amusement park he had been normal enough, walking straight, but the moment they had passed through those iron gates, he had become something else, not a man, not an animal, but fear embodied. He looked to the left and right, his hands held out before him at every crooked step to shield himself from a possible blow. Reggie could see the bones move beneath his ruined skin as the old man danced and shuddered in front of him.

And Reggie felt it too, as if the two of them had been covered with something living and rabid that waited only for a moment of weakness to attack.

Death.

"Bad . . ." Lucius moaned.

They paused under the Ferris wheel. The old man put his clawed hand on Reggie's arm and pointed with his other hand. "This way," he croaked, and for a moment, in the glare of the bright lights, when Reggie looked into his eyes, he saw—nothing.

Lucius turned away.

They came to a wooden trailer, painted gloomy black. Lucius mounted the three short steps at the back and knocked at a deeply inset door. No answer. He listened, his head trembling, and then he stepped back and put his hand to the knob. Reggie climbed up beside him as he pushed open the door and went in.

A shade was drawn over the single window; the room was pervaded by a sharp, sweet odor. The old man called softly, "Jeff Scott?" and then turned to Reggie. "1 can't," he said, stopping in his tracks.

Reggie pushed past him and entered. The room was close and hot. He could see nothing. His foot slipped on something, and he bent down to pull it from beneath his shoe. In the glow from the doorway, he saw that it was a cluster of pages from a book. He put it back down

on the floor, and his fingers felt other pages scattered about, and what felt like splinters of wood.

"Jeff Scott?" the old man called again. He stood rooted in the doorway. "The window," he rasped, and Reggie moved his hands like spiders over the wall, grasping the shade and trying to raise it. Finally he fumbled at the bottom, and the shade flew up, splashing artificial light from outside into the room. Other, smaller windows were revealed, with black tape over them.

"Oh, Lord," Lucius said.

The sharp illumination revealed the figure of a man slumped in a chair. The room was littered with broken furniture and torn books. The man's head was tilted forward on his chest, his feet planted firmly on the floor. One arm was draped across his lap.

"Jeff Scott?" the old man whispered fearfully, pushing into the trailer.

The figure made no response.

Reggie slowly reached out and put a finger to the figure's hand. It was cool to the touch. The face was away from him. He was lifting his hand to touch it when it suddenly turned and looked straight at him.

"That's not Jeff Scott," Lucius gasped.

"Son . . ." the thing in the chair rattled.

A transforming wave passed over Reggie. He felt joy—pure, silver joy—mingled with the chilled grip of doubt. The thing on the chair swiveled around, turning its body fully toward him and half-raising itself off the chair. It looked weak and stiff, but the same mixture of emotions, in a duller, more somber form, passed over its thin, dried features.

"Dad . . ." Reggie choked out.

His father settled his weight back into the chair and put his hands on his knees. His hollow eyes filled with an inner light. He shook his head, a slow, deliberate action that seemed to consume all his energy and attention.

"Son," he repeated.

A battle raged within Reggie. He felt a smooth, long curtain drop over his eyes, a curtain that would turn this thin, shivering thing into the father he had once known. Even as he watched, his father's face filled out; his uniform became sharply creased and spanking clean; his face widened into the happy, fulfilled expression he had always worn for Reggie. His hands were smooth and sure-gripped, his shoes polished to a shine. His eyes said, "Yes, this is me, here I am, enjoy me and forget about everything else. . . ."

"That's not what you are!"

Reggie drove the curtain away and it dissolved, leaving a quivering thin bit of flesh stretched over crumbling bones with his

father's face, his father's sad, dead, animated body.

"That day when I rode my bicycle—"

"I know," his father said painfully.

"I only wanted to say good-bye."

His father nodded, a torturous act. "Your mother—" he began.

Suddenly his father's corpse seemed possessed by demons. Something had entered the room, a presence that was not physical but hung in the air, in the corners, coldly.

"Oh, God, please help me!" his father shouted. He held a shaking hand out. "I only want to go back!"

Reggie saw that Lucius, too, had reverted to the wailing, begging thing he had seen first in the church-yard and had fallen to the floor.

Reggie's father pleaded, "Don't let him deceive you, Reggie. Oh, God, just let me go back!" Once again the curtain sought to drop across

Reggie's vision, making his father's face burst into a false, filling smile, his begging hand become caressing.

Reggie fought it, and once more his father was a decaying, crying thing begging for acquittal.

Reggie's mind was a battleground. He felt two powers fighting within him, one cool and rational, calmly assessing what was happening around him, draining him of the cringing fear that had possessed him in the churchyard; the other insidious, seeking to fog his mind and eyesight, a pouncing terror that would lull him with hallucination and then push him over the ledge into the abyss. He knew now who this second power was—the abyss, the Dark Thing itself—but the first remained a mystery to him, although he drew deeply from it now, filling his mind with the clarity it promised and the calmness of spirit it produced.

Close by, Reggie heard a sibilance of rage. *Go then.* His father screamed once, in relief as much as in terror, and his face began to melt away. In the dimming eyes, for the last second of existence, there was the barest hint of love. "Good-bye," Reggie whispered, and the mouth, rapidly falling away, formed for the briefest time the same word in answer before the face was gone.

The mass of skin flaked away. This was not Reggie's father any longer. The head fell powerless onto the breast, and there Reggie thought it would stay, but it suddenly raised itself again.

The face was transformed. Patches of skull shone through, and the eyes were liquid masses of jelly. One eyelid curled up all the way over an eye, revealing it as perfectly round; then the eyes disintegrated, and something long and gray dropped out.

This is what I am, the hissing voice spoke behind Reggie. *This is what you fight.*

That other, second power assaulted Reggie, sought to throw his mind into turmoil and reeling panic.

Since you care so much for the dead, let me show you what will happen to your body when I have you.

The other eye of the thing in the chair snapped open, and a long, gray worm dropped out, followed by another, and another. The front of the thing's chest was quickly covered with worms. The segmented monsters began to fall to the floor, sliding toward Reggie. The mouth of the sitting creature opened in a slit grin, revealing no teeth behind the thin lips; the jaw dropped down, and more worms, larger, oozed out. The figure's arms came up, and the ends of the hands, the fingers, became worms that quickly fell to the floor.

The thing's face turned toward Reggie, and the smile widened. The remaining skin was paper-thin, revealing the outline of the skull beneath.

"Reggie Carson," the thing rasped, its voice the same angry hiss Reggie had heard in the air close by his ear, the sound a baseball card makes against the spokes, of a bicycle. "This will be you, Reggie Carson."

The figure stood unsteadily. The mass of worms now reached, roiling, up to its ankles. It took a stumbling step toward Reggie and pointed a long, skeletal finger at him. "I'll have you soon." It threw back its head and screamed, a long, soulless screech. The head snapped down, the hollow eye sockets boring into Reggie, and once again it smiled.

"Let me show you what waits for the living."

The world darkened before Reggie, and then before him hung a face, moving too fast to see clearly. The picture enlarged to show figures speeding by. The image slowed and Reggie saw that it was the visage of a horse on the merry-go-round. Its head was tossed back, lips pulled away from its huge teeth, eyes staring wildly, ears against the skull in an attitude of fury. Its front legs were half-lifted; its back legs dug into the gray wooden platform of the carousel, almost sinking into it. Strapped to the horse's red saddle was Reggie's mother. She was sobbing, her dress torn down nearly to her waist. The leather of the horse's restraining strap was pulled into a bleeding cinch around her middle.

The horse reeled toward Reggie, and his mother saw him and began to call out, reaching her hands to him. As Reggie watched helplessly, the horse came to life, its wild head rearing up with a howl of frenzy that drowned his mother's screams. The head rotated, burying itself in his mother's breast. She let out a horrified cry and tried to push away from the animal. Foam flew from its nostrils as it bit at her wildly.

See what happens to the dead.

The carousel wheeled, carrying his mother away, and the vision disintegrated. Reggie saw that the thing in the chair was gone, and now Lucius was whimpering behind him.

"Oh, Jeff Scott."

Reggie blinked, and the room came into focus.

In the center of the ceiling, running into the room through the roof, was a thick hemp rope. At the end of the rope hung a body. It was not dead. It was half-man, half-skeleton. The horrible choking sound it gave off made Reggie's stomach heave. It rotated slowly, and though the knot was tight around its neck and its hands and feet were bound, it did not cease to struggle.

"Oh, God," Lucius moaned, "Oh, God, he'll die forever now." He broke off into a series of low, choking sobs.

Jeff Scott twisted, gasping piteously for breath.

"We'll cut him down," Reggie said. He went to the chair and brought it over below the body. Jeff Scott kicked his feet feebly; the fleshy side of his face was purple; his tongue thrust out, trying to lick at the air and bring it into his lungs.

Reggie stood up on the chair, but as he reached up, it was pulled out from under him.

"Oh, God," Lucius cried. "It's too late for you to save him."

Reggie tried to set the chair up again, but once more it was knocked aside by an unseen hand. He turned to Lucius in rage. "Help me!"

Lucius stood immobile.

"Dammit, why don't you help me?"

"Because he owns me too!" Lucius sobbed. "And he owns Jeff Scott. My dream was false—"

Lucius screamed at the air, at the walls: "Please take me! Let me rest, please let it stop!"

From somewhere indefinite came laughter. All right, a voice said, amused. Lucius howled, falling to the floor and trying to claw his way through the wooden planks to the earth below.

As Reggie watched, Lucius' heaving body turned to bones, the flesh falling away like dust; his eyes turned to ashes in their sockets, sprinkling out as his hair flaked away.

The skeleton that remained, thin and bleached-white, stood up and pointed shakily at Reggie.

"He'll have you," it said in Lucius' terrified voice. "He'll play with you until he's tired, then he'll take you. There's no hope for anyone."

It tilted its grinning skull back and shrieked. It beat its fists against the side of its head, and then began to pull at the bones of its chest, its arms, its legs, trying to knock itself to pieces.

"Take me!"

A gust of wind blew into the trailer. Lucius' bones, howling with want, crumbled into powder. His cry faded, leaving only ashes that drifted away into the corners and were gone.

Filled with rage, Reggie set the chair under Jeff Scott once again—but as he climbed onto it, as his hands nearly touched the hanging man, the chair shattered beneath him and flew into sawdust.

Reggie heard a low, clicking laugh somewhere in the room.

"Is this boy the one you think I'm afraid of, Jeff Scott?" the amused, untroubled voice asked the swinging corpse. "I think that with Frances' help, we'll let Reggie Carson see a world of his own."

Reggie turned to see Crazy Frances, the woman who lived in front of the Montvale barbershop and shouted Scripture at anyone who passed. She filled the doorway, a thin, haggard figure; only her eyes were terribly alive, two bright fires in her dead, white face.

"And thou, Capernaum," she said, "which art exalted unto heaven, shalt be brought down to hell."

The walls of the trailer disappeared. Reggie screwed his hands into his eyes, shielding them from an in-tense and bitter light. There was a roaring in his ears; the earth moved beneath him as if it were liquid and then hardened again. The world spun. Through all this Reggie heard the horrible gasps of Jeff Scott, hanging in eternity above him.

The world quieted, became whole.

Reggie rose. Above him, high in the red-black sky, hung from the spokes of a turning wagon wheel on a tall, thin pole, was Jeff Scott. His choking cries echoed hollowly in the hot air. Montvale's amusement park was gone; in its place was a fiercer place, a world that Reggie already knew. Below the slowly rotating wheel that imprisoned Jeff Scott there was a ruined, red-filtered landscape covered with smoke and blackness and reverberating with the screams of the desperate and dying. Jagged cliffs gave way to abrupt pits of steaming lava, and towers rose like black hands through the thick mist. The sky was a sick yellow-red. Fires burned everywhere; there was a sharp smell of roasting meat. Faint calls from a sinking ship could be heard off a none-too-distant coastline.

To Reggie's left, bones were laid out in a neat line. To his right, an open casket bearing a shrouded body slowly rolled by on wheels, bumping roughly over a torso on the ground. Reggie vaguely recognized the face on the body being overrun. Someone from Montvale. The rolling casket was drawn by two cowled figures, one in red, one in black. One of them turned sideways, and Reggie saw the silhouette of a skull. The figures, along with their burden, disappeared into the closing fog.

Reggie turned to his right and nearly tripped over a bony figure

kneeling on the ground. It looked up at him, the eyeless sockets of its polished skull staring at him, and then bent to its task again. Before Reggie could interfere, it deftly slit the throat of a man stretched out beneath it. It was Mr. Griffin, the mailman. Griffin gurgled, his eyes wide with terror—but the skeleton held him down while the life drained from the new mouth in his neck.

Reggie tried to kick the skeleton away, but it looked up at him impassively, ignoring the blow. It turned to grin down at its victim, whose head now lolled to one side.

There was more scuffling in the mist ahead. Reggie stumbled into a group of skeletons battling humans. He passed through them unmolested; some of the people's faces also looked familiar, like neighbors from Montvale, but he could not name them.

A terrible clarity possessed him. He knew now what he had to do. Neither the cries of those around him nor the knowledge that his mother stood somewhere on this battlefield, possibly alone, could dissuade him. That other power, the one that had fought so true a crusade within him against the dark man, the power that was a mystery to him, had taken firm hold and flowered within him. He was no longer afraid. Now he looked on his former dread as if it had been another's, as if he had watched its bizarre antics from a great distance. He had grown. He understood little of what had happened to him, but he knew that it had occurred and that he was a different Reggie Carson. He felt possessed by what had once been a small part of himself, now bloomed to become all of himself.

As if in confirmation of these thoughts, the two enormous eyes, soft limpid globes, appeared before him. He knew now that he had been wrong about them, that his rejection of them had been a wrong act, wrongly conceived. They had done things to him, but there had been a reason for all of it. There still was. He felt a great relief wash over him.

I am with you, the eyes told him.

"I know," he said to them.

In a little while you will have your answers, but for now, you know what you must do.

"Yes, I know," Reggie said.

I am with you, the eyes said again, and Reggie felt a radiance wash over him, bathe him, fill him.

Long ago Reggie had mastered in his mind each detail he now saw before him. He knew that if he walked on, he would come to a round table covered with a white tablecloth on which he would find remnants of a ruined meal; and in front of that table there would be a lone man with a drawn sword—the figure he had so often imagined

himself to be, the single soldier with a weak yet defiant blade trying to hold out against death itself.

Off in the foggy distance a low bell tolled ponderously, once, twice, again. It was the slowest, most mournful sound he had ever heard. He knew from Breughel's picture where the bell was, knew that two figures, with bones for bodies, were tolling it.

The triumph of death.

He could make his way toward that bell, but the one he sought would not be there. That bell would not toll from his battlement. He felt sure of that. There were many places he might be, but this didn't worry him because, somehow, he knew that he would be led where he must go.

The breeze shifted. An evil, sulfur-smelling wind blew at him. The mist parted before him, and Reggie moved forward.

Somewhere close by, up in the sulfurous clouds, he heard Jeff Scott give a long, guttural gasp, and then the choking sounds were behind him.

He was heading the right way.

NINETEEN

He would be King of the Dead

Pup Malamut let the sound of the phrase roll around his mind on velvet casters. *King of the Dead.* It was a nice thought, a substantial thought, the kind that once he might have dreamed only at night but now could take out in the cold sun and look at without shrinking. How fast things could change. One day an ineffectual little fat boy, taking orders from everyone, from his parents to his teachers to the two younger boys he hung out with, and the next day—King of the Dead.

Ash had said it in so many words and Pup believed him. He had studied Ash, had seen how insubstantial he was and how there was something the shadow man was holding back on. Ash acted tough when he was around people who were afraid of him, but there was something, some secret thing, that scared the boogeyman senseless. Pup had seen it in Ash's eyes when he'd taken care of that Civil War relic, Jeff Scott. A couple of Scott's comments had hit home. But what was it that frightened Ash so badly? Pup didn't know, but he was determined to find out. And when he did—well, then he'd deal with Ash.

The killing of Jack Gantry had not disturbed him as he had thought it would. All he had to do was to let the feelings he'd always kept deep down come out in the open. The rest was easy. Jack had been his friend, but he had also been his better, so he thought. Stupid Marine. So Pup just thought of it that way and let the juices flow. After Jack were others Ash had let him in on: his math teacher, Mrs. Groton; a guy named Fred Horter, who'd once called him "fat boy" in the schoolyard; a couple of others. It had actually been easy after a while. Ash had told him to just remember the hate; and when he did, everything came naturally. After all, he was just getting even. Anyone would do that, given the chance. In regular life he probably would never have had a chance to get back, and here it was on a silver platter, so why not?

His parents, though, had not been so easy. Ash's eyes had sparkled when he told Pup he wanted him to take care of his parents. And for the first time, Pup had hesitated.

"What's wrong?" Ash cooed. Pup felt his perfect admiration for Ash slipping into something else. A momentary burn of pure anger rose in him.

I'll take care of you later, he thought.

He answered, "Nothing's wrong," liking his own bravado.

"They're by the House of Mirrors," Ash said evenly. "Make it quick."

Pup put a smile on, but he couldn't help feeling as he walked out that Ash knew. He knows I'm chicken. Once again a flow of clean hatred coursed through him. He wanted more than anything in the world to hold Ash's thin neck between his hands, to crush the white face and pummel the smug grin away. Ash thought he knew it all. But if everything went as planned, he would soon be terrified of Pup Malamut. Ash could be handled. Just like his father handled all those assholes who came to him at the bank for business loans. There was always a way to handle things.

He made his way out onto the midway. Still he felt Ash's eyes on him. He glanced back, expecting to see nothing but the closed flap of the tent; he was shocked to see Ash standing there in the opening, calmly watching him. That slight grin was on his face; he blew a smoke ring and waved faintly at Pup with his lit cigarette.

Just wait, bastard; soon I'll shove that fucking thing down your throat till you choke on it.

He turned, marching resolutely toward the House of Mirrors.

His nerve failed again when he got there. Were they really inside? Maybe they weren't, and he wouldn't have to go through with it. How would Ash know? And even if he did, so what? He hesitated at the entrance, listening for sounds. Nothing. Maybe it was a trap? Ash wouldn't dare; he needed him, he had told him so. Anyway, he had promised.

"Pup, you'll be King of the Dead."

He entered the House of Mirrors.

He kept his eyes on the floor, following the twists and turns of the labyrinth. He'd learned this trick long ago at a local carnival with Reggie. Once inside, he looked up and immediately felt a sense of dislocation. Staring at him were six young men with uncombed hair and set mouths. He hadn't looked at himself in a long time and was startled. He seemed older and leaner. There was a tautness around his eyes and face that hadn't been there before. He liked what he saw.

King of the Dead.

He dropped his gaze and followed the sawdust-covered maze of mirrors.

His mind began to wander. He thought of what it would be like when he was the leader of everything. He would have all the food he wanted and no one to tell him what to eat or when. And there would be girls. Not like Lavinia Crawford; after Ash had presented him with the real Lavinia Crawford, he had quickly tired of her, and after the second time, he'd discovered that with her it was not all he had dreamed it would be. She was, it turned out, as stupid as a cow, and after hearing Ash talking with him about what he would have in the future, she had demanded that she be part of it too. He'd been almost

relieved when he got rid of her, though he had felt a bit of revulsion about it. After all, she had been the first girl he'd ever done it with, and, well, it had felt as if she had taken a part of him with her.

After that he'd begun to think about other girls he'd known, and Ash had arranged for him to be with a couple of them. He'd decided then that it would be best to have many girls rather than just one. They each had something to offer, even the ones who fought. It would be best to have a lot to choose from. And if they didn't obey him—well, that's why they'd call him King of the Dead.

Up ahead there was the sound of a breaking mirror.

Seven years' bad luck, his mind said automatically. Then there came the sound of another breaking mirror, and a shout. His mother? He couldn't be sure. He quickened his steps, suddenly rounded a corner and stepped onto broken glass shards.

"Oh, Pup."

When his mother spoke his name, her voice had a tone of relief in it that had never been there before. She was disheveled. Her expensive gown was torn at the shoulder, her hair pushed out of place. It figured that she would have taken the time to put on her most elegant things before leaving for the amusement park. It was just like her to show up everybody else in town. There was a silk purse on the ground, covered with bits of broken mirror and powdery sawdust, its contents scattered. One of his mother's shoes was missing. Her eyeliner was smudged, making her look like a teary raccoon.

A hate for her greater than he had ever known welled up within him.

"Pup. I've been so alone in here, and I can't find my way out."

She limped toward him, whimpering.

"Where's Father'?" Pup asked.

She waved in the opposite direction. Her voice was affected and breathy. "He went on ahead. I told the foolish man to stay with me, but you know he never listens." She held out her hand to him, as if they were at a cocktail party. "Pup, get me out of here."

Pup brushed past her to listen at the next turn in the mirrored path.

"How long ago did he leave you?"

She bent down and began to retrieve her cosmetics, shoveling them back into her handbag. "Ten, fifteen minutes. We've been in here so long."

Pup saw only a dark, reflective twisting ahead.

Behind him, his mother said, "Dreadful place. It just isn't what I thought it would be, and I doubt that it's good for Montvale. I came only because I thought I saw your grandmother, but of course it couldn't have really been her, and she led us into this mirror place and

then abandoned us. I'll have to recommend that Mayor Poundridge close down this entire monstrosity." She stood up. In a few short moments she had managed to rearrange her hair and make herself presentable again. Even her eyeliner smears were gone. "Pup, take me out of here now," she said.

A deep hesitation clutched Pup. He hated this woman with a deeper hate than he ever had—but she was his mother.

"Pup, are you listening to me, hmm?"

An image was forming in the mirrors around Pup. Ash smiling knowingly at him, cigarette saluting limply in his hand as if to say, "I know you can't do it, boy. You don't have the stuff to be King of the Dead. "

"Pup, do as I say this instant."

There was her face, her huge face, staring down at him, telling him what to do, and his tiny two-year-old hands reached up to hit at her, to hit her away, and sudden fire came into her eyes, and her hand was momentarily on his neck before she slapped him for the first and last time —

His mother's throat was in Pup's hands before he knew what he was doing. He knew he had to do it quickly or not at all. His tie to her was too strong, and even hate, when too strong, could turn into something else and immobilize him. And then there were Ash's eyes. He knew they were still in that mirror, taunting him; he knew that if he looked anywhere, at the mirror or down at his mother's face, he would not be able to complete what he had started.

Trying not to feel the weakening pulse between his tight fingers, he looked up at the ceiling of the House of Mirrors. To his shock, there were mirrors up there too. The entire ceiling was silvered, throwing back reflections of the ground. He did not look at what was in his hands. He saw only himself, his own straining face. When he looked into his own eyes, he knew he would be all right. They were the eyes of someone he knew and trusted, the only person in the whole world he liked:

King of the Dead.

He left his mother in the sawdust, with the contents of her handbag once more scattered: the compact and lipsticks and eye shadows that had been her masks against him.

Up ahead someone stumbled in the corridor, cursing loudly. Pup knew that everything would be all right now.

His father appeared between two mirrors, the reflection in the twin silvered glasses turning him into triplets. He looked at Pup and then down at his wife, lying on the ground.

He used that same tight-eyed, weighing look he always used when measuring a situation. When he saw his wife, his eyes widened almost

imperceptibly. But almost at once they regained their normal dull luster.

"Raymond," he said, using Pup's real first name. The word held many things at once: command, you'd better respect me—and, surprisingly, almost a hint of understanding.

Pup said nothing as his father stepped fully into the room, leaving his mirrored twins behind.

As disheveled as his mother had been, his father was still neat in appearance. He wore a tie with a small, sharp red knot at the top of his white collar; his late-summer sports jacket was properly unwrinkled. Somehow, as always, he looked recently shaved. His full but firm face was set in his most businesslike way. Even his shoes, with all of the walking and scuffling about he must have done, looked newly shined, the black leather hardly creased behind the toe. A businessman, always a businessman.

"Something mighty strange going on here," his father said. This pronouncement seemed at once to include everything he meant: strange amusement park, strange end for his wife, strange son standing before him. If he showed any surprise about any of it, he kept it well hidden.

"Quite strange," he said, moving closer to Pup and not taking his eyes off him now.

"Why don't you stop?" Pup asked. He tried to sound casual and was delighted to find that there was no nervous ring in his voice. It sounded very much like his father's voice.

"I want you to listen to me carefully, Raymond," his father said, taking another step forward.

"I said stop!"

His father stopped short. The very fact that he had done so seemed to both surprise and frighten him, and for the first time in his life, Pup saw his father unsure of himself. His father looked in the mirrors, at the multiple, diamond-like reflections of the scene around them.

"What do you want me to do?" his father asked.

"Don't move. Don't move a step."

He already knows who I am, Pup thought. He can sense it, taste it. He thinks he can make a deal with me.

"Can we talk, Pup?" his father asked coolly.

"You never wanted to talk before."

Red anger flushed around his father's starched collar, but he kept his control. *The man is marvelous.*

"I'm your father."

Pup was silent.

Pup could see the gears shift in his father's mind. *How to handle this boy?* he was thinking; *what new tactic to try? What direction to come*

in from this time? It was like the electronic chess game Pup had. When it was the computer's move, a little red light stayed on until it had finished working through the possibilities. The longer the tiny red light stayed on, the better you knew your own move had been because it meant the machine was stumped and trying to find a good move in a losing game.

Pup thought, *The machine is stumped.*

The little red light in his father's eyes went out, and he said, "You'll need help." Pup smiled, and the red light went on again almost immediately; he was wishing he had the move back, wanting to think some more, because he knew he hadn't said the right thing.

His father drove ahead, seeing nothing better to do, trying to twist things around his way as he went along.

"You can't do it by yourself, Pup. You're too young." He closed his mouth for a moment, a red flush again crawling over his collar, and took a heavy breath. "I've been at this game a long time, I can teach you everything I know."

"I already know everything you know. I watched you."

"There's more, much more. It isn't all on the outside, you know. There are things you can't learn from watching—"

"The rest I taught myself, just like you did."

Before he could stop himself, his father said, "Do you hate me that much?" The very fact that he was saying something like this told him that he was losing the game. He nearly panicked. A new tint came over his features, not of self-anger or reproach or frustration, but of fear. He was losing.

"I can see where you would hate me," he went on. He tried to talk himself into some new advantage. He would talk forever, given the chance, Pup knew. Plenty of times Pup had seen him take a man he had just cheated out of a big sum of money and in the course of a few minutes, or maybe over lunch, make the man think he was in the presence of the best friend he had ever had. The money meant nothing: he would let Pup's father do it to him again for the pleasure of it, and often he did. Pup's father was a usurer of rare talents who enjoyed not so much the money he made as how he made it, the process of fucking-over his customers. "I don't see why that hate you have for me can't change, Pup."

A rage was building in Pup, and at the same time, he wanted to laugh.

"You killed your own mother," his father blurted out. He pointed with a shaking finger at the sprawled corpse on the ground. "How could you do such a thing?"

"You've been slowly killing her for years," Pup answered. "Not that she didn't deserve it. Do you think you were good to her?"

"No," his father said desperately. "I wasn't good to her because I didn't love her. But she made us stay together, she *made* me stay with her because of you."

The red light blinked on in his eyes again, instantly going off. He knew he had found a good move.

Something struck at Pup, something way down inside the layers and layers. For a reeling second of time he was not the King of the Dead. He was something else. A tiny voice down there called him an imposter, a liar, a cheat. The voice started to grow.

His father saw what was happening. He'd seen it many times before, and he dived into the tiny opening, threading the needle perfectly with his words. "However bad it was, she made a home for you, Pup. Even though she was rotten at them, she did all the things a mother is supposed to do because she believed that that was the way it was supposed to be. We even had an agreement that once you went away to college in a few years, we would get a divorce. But she wouldn't even talk about it until then. *She loved you, Pup.*"

The little voice in Pup began to shout horrible things at him. He looked at a mirror on the wall, a distorted ceiling-to-floor mirror with a long crack down its middle. The crack tore right through his face and made it into two not quite halves. The halves didn't meet in the middle. That was the way his mind felt now, as though someone were breaking it into two jagged parts with a hammer.

You're not the King of the Dead. You're a murderer.

"Even if I didn't love you enough, Pup, she did."

The two pieces of his head were grinding against one another, trying to jam themselves back together. Pup screamed, clutching at his hair, digging his fingers deep into his scalp. He stumbled toward the broken mirror, hitting it with his shoulder. The mirror shattered into thin, sharp bits, raining them down like tinkling bells. Pup fell to the sawdust and began to sob into his hands.

"You killed her, Pup," his father dug in relentlessly, close by his ear.

"No!"

"Yes you did. You killed her with your own hands."

Pup looked through his tears and saw on the ground before him, reflected in a bright shard of mirror, his father standing above him with a knife-sharp sliver of glass in his hand, bringing it down at him.

Pup rolled over, rising to his knees. His father lunged at the spot where he had been. The makeshift blade shattered, and he backed away. There was an animal glow in his eyes, feral-bright points of instinct. *You bastard,* Pup thought, *you used her dead like you used her alive.*

His father turned and ran off into the maze of mirrors. He pushed

himself away from a large glass that broke as he hit it, and ran on.

Pup stood up calmly. His eyes caught the fallen form of his mother, now covered with speckles of mirror. There was nothing in his heart for her. She had deserved it his father deserved it more. Even if what his father had said was true, it changed nothing. She was dead, it was too late to do anything for her, and his father was the real culprit.

A small grin crept over Pup's face as he stepped over his mother's still body and into the maze.

He heard his father's rough breathing up ahead and the occasional sound of breaking glass. Pup followed resolutely. He didn't need to follow the sawdust on the ground now; he could have walked this path with his eyes closed if he had had to. He knew the way to go. In a dimly lit glass ahead of him, Ash's face appeared, smokily indistinct. The mouth opened and closed, the blood slit saying something to him. Pup moved past, unminding, though he thought he heard Ash's laughter. *I'm King of the Dead,* he thought. Nothing would stop him now.

There was a shout and then a strong intake of breath from ahead, and he heard another crash of flesh against glass. Soon there appeared in the sawdust a few drops of blood and then one of his father's shoes. A pile of slivers came into view, revealing a broken three-sided cusp of mirrors. Blood was spattered everywhere. Close by he heard labored breath, and then, from around a corner, his father appeared. He was limping. One trouser leg was nearly torn off, held only by a few threads.

When he saw Pup, he turned and hobbled away, holding his leg with both hands.

"Stop," Pup commanded, and his father came to an abrupt halt. He fell in a heap, whimpering. "Please, son," he wheezed. "Please."

Pup calmly approached.

"Son?" he mocked. "Did you call me 'son'? You never called me that before. Do you really want to admit, after all this time, that I am your son—fat and slow and seemingly stupid as I am?"

"Yes! You're my son," his father wept. "You've always been my son." He held his trembling hands together. "I've always loved you."

"Call me King of the Dead."

His father stared at him. All at once the old animal look crawled onto his features. Then something, some buried relay switch, snapped on, and he changed his mind.

"You're my son!" he pleaded.

"Call me King of the Dead."

"Isn't it enough for you to be my son?"

You can do it, Ash's voice said to Pup from somewhere close by.

"My third birthday," Pup said.

It was his third birthday. It was the first birthday he remembered, and he was surrounded by presents. There was a rocking horse on springs, a huge expensive thing of plastic and real mane hair, and a pile of other toys: books, a tricycle, a stuffed monkey, windup soldiers. Thirty relatives and children from his pre-school class were there. The cake was as big as Pup himself. He sat at the head of the dining-room table, the place of honor, his father's place.

"Where's Daddy?" he asked when his mother leaned over him to cut the cake. His father was the only one in his universe not there. All afternoon he had wondered where his daddy was. Now he had been made to sit in his father's spot at the table, and he wanted to know where he was.

"He had to go to work today, Puppy," his mother said. Though her face kept its smile, something that was obvious to him then, even at that age, changed in her eyes. "But he sent you all these presents. He really wanted to be here, but he just had to work today."

"I want Daddy here!" Pup said petulantly, striking the edge of the table with his small fist.

"He'll be home soon," she said, beginning to grow nervous.

Pup knew she was lying, and he became even more hysterical. "I want Daddy!"

"Pup," his mother soothed, "I said he'll be home soon!"

"Daddy! Daddy!"

Pup struck at the table with both hands. His mother, embarrassed, tried to lift him from his chair. He resisted, throwing out his fingers at her face. She stumbled back from him. He pushed the birthday cake aside and sank his fists into it. His face was red and he was crying explosively. "Daddy!"

He threw the cake from the table. It landed with a collapsing thud on the floor. One of his aunts got out of her chair and moved toward him. He screamed in rage and kicked at the fallen cake, sending soft pieces flying around the room. He ran into the living room, where his presents were stacked neatly after the opening ceremony; he lifted them, one after another, over his head and hurled them as far as he could. Hands reached down at him then, and he looked up into his mother's horrified face and screamed at her: "Get away!" She pulled her hands back, and he threw himself at the horse his father had bought him, tearing at the mane with his hands, trying to pull it from its springs. He climbed onto it. The horse tilted ominously, but he didn't notice. He held on tight and kicked furiously, trying to break it. He pulled a great handful of hair from the mane. The hair's coming loose threw him off balance. He dug in with his shoes to the side of the horse, and his momentum threw the toy animal over sideways. He

saw the ground looming up, heard the squeak of springs. The wooden floor rushed up at him, and then there was night. . . .

Silence. Pup's hands were clenched into tight balls. At first he saw only mirrors and his own red-faced reflection in them. Then he saw another reflection, a mound of something on the floor in front of him. It was a shapeless red and fabric thing. At first his eyes would not focus on it, but gradually the haze cleared from his vision and he saw what it was. *Even a horse couldn't do that,* he thought, and instantly knew that a crazed horse could. Portions of what had once been human were so beaten that a large horse's hoof mark was plainly visible, as if the animal had stepped into soft mud.

Pup turned. For a moment he felt sharp, sour bile climbing his throat, but he steadied himself. He took a few long breaths, stood straight and willed himself to look back, and when he did, a small crest of nausea passed over him, but then he felt fine. He had the stomach for it now. He took another long breath and didn't look away.

He wouldn't be squeamish again. For a moment he thought Ash was standing before him, but he saw only his own cold eyes staring back at him in a mirror. Suddenly, thinking of how Ash had taunted him, he wanted Ash to be there. A flash of pure anger went through him, and his eyes lingered on the mirror, waiting for Ash to appear.

You'll get yours.

Abruptly there came a strange light, and fear bolted through him as the House of Mirrors began to disintegrate. Fear turned to awe. Before his eyes one world was being torn down and another erected. The walls around him vanished, turning to insubstantial beads of mist, leaving another place behind, a red world. He found himself in an open area, with clouds high above in a black and crimson sky. There was a low wall of roughly blocked stones to his left; a circular stairway was cut into it, corkscrewing up and around. He walked to it and mounted the steps. Low thunderheads were crawling by above; thick, evil puffs of fog moved beneath them, challenging their slow progress. The world seemed all blacks and reds and deep yellow-browns.

Did I do this?

The thought coursed through him, but then he was filled with doubt. He hadn't willed anything like this to happen. Had Ash? No, he knew that Ash did not have that kind of power on his own. He was just a leech; he could only use hate and fear siphoned off from others. At least that's what Ash had told him. That's why he'd been drawn to Pup, he said—because Pup had enough hate to "do all kinds of things." And that was where the idea of the King of the Dead had come from. "Why not?" Ash had smiled. "Why can't you do anything you want?"

Pup had known that Ash was greasing him up, stringing him

along, giving him one of his father's best loan-officer looks—level and cool. But the wheels in Pup's head had begun at that moment to turn smooth and tight. Let Ash jerk him around; then Pup would find out how he ticked and—

You'll get yours, Ash.

But if Pup hadn't willed this new setup into being, who had? Who had enough power, or hate, or fear, to make this happen?

Now real fury rose in Pup to think that there was someone out there who would steal Ash away from him. The idea was unbearable. This new adversary would have to be dealt with immediately, have to be overcome and torn to bits. There could be no negotiation, no drawn-out inquiry. Pup wanted what he wanted now.

He trudged to the top of the tower and surveyed the countryside surrounding him.

There was something about it—

He knew this world. A moan, half-gasp, half-cry of wrath, came out of him. He knew this world. Before him was laid out something so familiar and yet so alien that his mind could not at once comprehend it. A sweeping lowland stretched to the mist-shrouded horizon. To the north stood a dismal, black-watered bay with a foundering ship in its harbor. *The same one I used for Jack.* But that had been only a temporary hallucination, something he had pulled out of his memory as suitable. This world was much more detailed and complete. On land there were only scenes of death, a sprawling panorama of marching skeletons, and stumbling humans falling before their onslaught. Some of the bone men bore weapons: long blades or sickles or knives, thin and sharp. Some worked in gangs, closing in on one or two people, and then dragging them off to hang or behead or burn. The ground was stained red in spots.

Grinning skeletons were by far in the majority—possibly the ghoulish Montvale dead Ash had summoned to man Jeff Scott's amusement park.

As Pup watched, fascinated, a huge phalanx of skeletons swarmed like ants out of a cave and fell upon a group of Montvale citizens. A dim chorus of screams arose as the two groups met head on.

Pup was mesmerized. This was more than he had ever imagined. The sheer amount of killing filled him with exhilaration. This was the kind of thing he would have liked to have come up with. For the briefest moment he wondered again if he had, somehow, invented it all. But he knew this wasn't true. Someone else held the key to this carnage.

Off to one side, in the far distance, a lone figure appeared in a spot remarkably free of activity. At first Pup could not make out who it was. Mist drifted in, and the form vanished into a whirl of sickly red

smoke. But then the mist cleared and Pup had his answer. And he knew what place this was. He thought of all the times he had stared at this same scene, now come to life before him, as a poster on a wall in a bedroom in a place called Montvale. That same figure stumbling toward him now had stood by that picture many times, pointing out the minute details and explaining what it all meant, how this or that symbolized something or other—making it all seem real, and scary, and fun. That same figure had even carried a copy of that poster in his wallet so he could study it anywhere.

So it's Reggie Carson.

A wolf's smile crept over Pup Malamut's face. Reggie, almost within hailing distance now, looked tired and worn and not at all indomitable. Maybe he didn't even know what he had done, what he was capable of doing. And then for some glorious reason,

Jeff Scott's taunting words to Ash, the ones that had so enraged him, slipped into Pup's mind, and his smile became even wider.

So this is who Ash is afraid of.

It all fit so neatly that he laughed out loud. Ash was afraid of Reggie Carson, and had been willing to give himself to Pup to have Reggie out of the way. *You'll be King of the Dead, Pup.* Sure, and then after Pup had gotten rid of Reggie for him, Ash would turn on him. But what Ash didn't know was that Pup had his, own plans and hadn't been fooled for a moment by that soothing voice, the limp, friendly grin. *King of the Dead, Pup.* Well, if Ash was afraid of Reggie and wanted someone to help do away with him, fine. And then, once that someone had found out the secret to Reggie's power over Ash and delivered him on a silver platter to the shadow man

You'll get yours, Ash.

Reggie was just below the tower. Pup stood up.

"Hey!" he shouted, waving his arms and putting as much feeling as he could into his voice. "Reggie, it's me!" He wanted to add, "It's me, King of the Dead," but that could wait. The genuine gladness that had spread over Reggie's face upon seeing Pup would do more than well enough for now.

You won't smile for long, Musketeer.

Pup nearly raced down the stone steps, trying to keep his heart from leaping with joy. He wanted to crush Reggie with happiness, lift him off the ground and kiss him. Reggie had made it all possible. The hate went off to the side for a moment; there was such genuine feeling on his features that Reggie would take it for granted that this was the reunion of two lost friends. Even as he flew down the remaining steps, Pup's mind was constructing appropriate ways to resolve things. How to handle Reggie? There were probably a hundred, a thousand, good ways. They vied in Pup's mind for attention, and he tried to give them

all the loving care they required. Above all other thoughts, one only hung like a huge, joyful, black cloud; one thought alone minimized even the wonderful expectation he felt at the coming extermination of his final problem. It really would come true; he knew finally that his actions up to now had not been in vain, had not been merely the venting of some demented adolescent spleen on those closest to him.

I really will be King of the Dead.

TWENTY

At the moment Reggie Carson faced Pup Malamut's wild, grinning, beast's face, he knew how it would happen. Somehow the knowledge calmed him, as if an insistent but relatively trivial question had been answered. Pup clasped him like a brother; and on the outside, at least, he seemed the same friend Reggie had known for years and years. And yet there was something essentially changed in him. He was gaunt inside his flesh, a thin canine thing in a fleshy body. Pup *belonged* in this world of red flame and black earth, was feeding off it like a fly might feed off a piece of fetid meat. Reggie knew it, despite the fact that this was the same Pup Malamut he had known for so long. This side of his friend had been there all along—perhaps had owned him all along—and now, under this sulfurous air and crimson atmosphere, he was illuminated. Reggie thought of little things Pup had done: the burning of ants with scalding water; the torture of a frog or a turtle; the anonymous letter he had once sent to the parents of a girl in one of their classes, saying that she was sleeping with one of her teachers—all because the girl had turned him down when he asked her to a school dance. These little facets of the flawed and broken gem that was Pup Malamut were brought into cracked light now, and all of the sides of Pup Malamut showed this same black face toward the sun.

Pup was evasive when Reggie asked about Jack.

"He's here somewhere," he said. His eyes glowed like nocturnal lamps.

When Reggie asked about Pup's mother, Pup was more affirmative.

"I know where she is," he said. He was more wolf than man now, crouching and voracious, like one of those monsters the Three Musketeers had conjured up to scare themselves with in the graveyard.

Pup pointed to a spot in the distance. "I saw your Mom over this way," he said.

They moved over red earth. Reggie knew the ground they were walking over as if it was imprinted, map-like, in his head.

They heard eerie sounds. With each shriek in the distance, Pup became more wolf-like, his features a grinning caricature, his body bony and repellent. He was feeding off the very air. There was no before or after in Pup Malamut—only the moment of death itself. He was a beast, a creature possessed by the act of death, caught in the amber stillness of it. Reggie remembered all the Three Musketeer meetings they had had, remembered the light in Pup's eyes when they told ghost stories or tried to scare each other in the dark. While Jack had only thrilled like a child to it, and Reggie had sought something beyond it, Pup had been drinking the moment of pain itself and

wanting more. There had been no thrill, no wonder for Pup Malamut, only the wish for hurt, the desire for death. Reggie now realized that Pup had attained his most secret wish.

"Not much farther," Pup said. When he turned to Reggie, his face was suffused with an almost angelic evil. Perhaps this was what Lucifer had looked like before his expulsion. Reggie had often dwelled on what evil must be like in its pure form, and now its essence was distilled in the face looking back at him.

"What's wrong?" Pup hissed. With all of its new awfulness, it was still Pup Malamut's face. "Is anything wrong?" Pup's smile returned layer upon layer until he was grinning again.

They crested a small rise. The mist rolled back before them like blown smoke. Pup pointed to an incongruous sight, a frayed carnival tent blown by a rusty wind, still intact in the midst of the hell around it. "There." As he said this, a figure appeared in the opening, pulling a shredded canvas flap aside to stand and look up placidly at them. Reggie knew who it was. The figure did something with its hands, and a thin plume of black smoke drifted up from its face. Pup waved, but the figure made no reply, only standing still a moment and then silently turning back into the tent.

Pup shouted, "Come on!" and then he was loping down the hill toward the tent, Reggie following calmly behind.

Pup pulled the tent flap aside and went in. When Reggie reached it, he hesitated. For the first time since the eyes had appeared to him, doubt entered his mind. It was as though he had entered another realm, one governed by different powers, and he was not so sure of himself now. A corner of his mind was sprouting another seed, tiny compared to the one the eyes had planted and grown, but one that had been there all along and had now flowered. It was the dark man's flower, and once again he had fear. He knew what awaited him in that tent, and he feared it.

Panic seized him. He turned wildly, a caught, hunted animal, and saw only haze and red smoke around him. He was doomed, and there was nowhere to turn. Outside, death awaited him (even the lone valiant soldier in Breughel's painting, he knew, would fall to the remorseless grim blade of the white-boned demons), and inside that tent, the same sure fate would befall him. He was surrounded by it. And then another, more horrible thought flowered in that tiny corner of his brain: maybe there was no tunnel of light; maybe there were no warming eyes; maybe there was nothing. Maybe there was only death, a thing with teeth and claws that ripped and sucked at your flesh forever. His hands were shaking, and there was a knot in his stomach that grew to fist size and began to twist within him. He wanted to get out. There was not enough air, there would never be enough cool air,

and he had to go somewhere else.

The tent flap drew aside slowly, and he screamed, expecting to see a horrid white face there, the face of it, but it was only Pup. The same Pup Malamut he had always known, his face flushed, eager and obedient.

"He wants you," Pup said, and he put a hand that felt like a tight metal clamp on Reggie's arm.

"Let me go," Reggie gasped.

Pup's smile grew. "Sorry," he said, and then he placed both hands on Reggie's shoulders and squeezed. A bolt of pain went through Reggie, from his shoulders down through his abdomen and thighs, as though hot lava had been injected into him.

Suddenly Reggie was sure that there was no way out for him. He had lost control of himself. The elaborate games he had played had all been for nothing. The lighted tunnel, the eyes—they had been only a dream, something he had built his whole false life on. He thought of begging but knew by the look in Pup's hungry eyes that pleading would do no good. He went limp, and Pup laughed, hoisting him up and dragging him through the tent's opening.

Reggie tensed and threw all his weight upward into Pup's middle. The blow caught Pup by surprise, and momentarily he lost his hold. Reggie fell and began to scramble to his feet.

Pup leaped onto his back, throwing him to the dust, and suddenly there was a great weight in Reggie's chest, and he could not breathe. He turned over, looking up into Pup's eyes and seeing there a light brighter than any he had ever seen.

"I'm going to kill you," Pup gloated into his face, his hands like pincers around Reggie's neck. "I'm going to pull your body to pieces with my bare hands." Pup's face seemed to have grown, and his body appeared monstrous, the body of a beastly giant. He raised one hand up over Reggie's face and brought it down hard, and there was a numbing pain and Reggie could see nothing. Then a blurry vision returned to one eye, and he saw Pup's fist raised again, swinging down in a terrible arc.

"Don't."

The voice came from behind Pup, and it was almost quiet. Pup hesitated, looking behind him, but then he shouted something hard and turned back to Reggie. His fist rose up, and again he brought it downward.

"Stop."

Again Pup stopped. His rage became huge, and he threw himself off Reggie in a quick motion, turning to face the voice. Reggie could not hear what was happening, but the ringing in his ears quieted and he pulled himself up.

Ash and Pup were face-to-face.

"Calm down," Ash said placidly, and Pup screamed at him, "I want to do it now!"

"When I say so," Ash responded, his voice growing impatient. "I want to talk with him."

"I said now!" Pup shot back. He seemed to tower over Ash, his face filled with rage.

For a moment there seemed to be an impasse, but then Ash reached out, touched Pup lightly with his finger and said in the same quiet tone he had begun the conversation with, "I said wait."

Pup grabbed at his chest where Ash had touched him and dropped to the floor. He tried to gasp but could not; his lungs were frozen solid; he could not even fight for breath. His face went from red anger to a desperate grimace as he fought for air.

Ash glanced down at him, and suddenly he could breathe again.

He gulped air for a time before turning to face Ash. "You can't do that," he said, and there was surprise as well as fury in his tone. "No one can do that to me." He pointed at Reggie. "He's the one you're afraid of, and you know it. I was going to kill him for you." He pulled another long draft of oxygen into his warming lungs.

Ash ignored Reggie, looking down complacently at Pup.

"And then?"

"You told me we could work together."

"Yes," Ash said. "But I never said how long it would last. And I don't think that's what you had in mind. Did you really think you were going to be `King of the Dead'?" He pronounced the last four words in mocking sarcasm.

Pup's anger began to rise again.

"I told you no one—" he started, but his chest tightened again, and then it was ice, and he fell, clawing at his shirt, trying to bring some warmth to his frozen lungs.

"The ego never ceases to amaze me," Ash lectured Pup sedately. "Did you really think you were anything more than an experiment? You had great hate, but in the end it is Frances who has given me everything I need. Which has made you nothing but an amusement. You really imagined that the fact that you were still alive around me pointed to some great power within you?" He laughed.

Ash turned slowly toward Reggie. Reggie found that he could not look directly into the shadow man's face, and that Ash would not look directly into his. Suddenly there was a definite note of wariness in Ash's voice.

"I am going to kill your friend Pup," he said, "and very slowly, because I want you to see what physical death is. You needn't feel sorry for him because"—he looked down at Pup's tortured face—"he's

been a very bad boy."

Reggie felt Ash's aura over him lessen. It was as if those tiny flowers of the dark man's had flourished and died, and Reggie's mind was clear again.

"Why don't you let him go?" Reggie asked quietly.

Ash hesitated before answering. "That would be foolish."

"I want you to let him go."

"That can't be done." Ash sounded almost unsure of himself.

Reggie bent down to help Pup to his feet. Pup clutched at him, trying to find air. Reggie turned his face to Ash.

"Take me instead."

"I'll have you both."

"Will you?"

'Yes."

Ash had banished his uncertainty, and Reggie was thrown away from Pup's body. With an artificial sound, air rushed into Pup's lungs and then was pulled out again, giving him an instantly withdrawn respite.

Ash stood over him. Pup looked imploringly at Reggie; and Reggie suddenly saw in the startled, terrified face the boy that Pup had been —so different from the creature he had become.

"Watch," Ash instructed Reggie, and then a low, humming wail started deep in Pup's throat and built to a piercing whine. His hands darted convulsively over his body, slapping everywhere as if a thousand bees were stinging him.

With infinite, tearing slowness, portions of Pup's flesh began to rip themselves from his body.

"You've heard of a pound of flesh?" Ash placidly asked Reggie. "I'll give you a hundred and fifty pounds of it. This will take quite some time, so I suggest you find a chair."

"Stop!" Reggie said, looking at the red flaking thing that was Pup Malamut thrashing and screaming on the ground. Pup's eyes were fixed on Reggie's, wild with pain and terror.

The flesh slowly ripped away from around Pup's eyeballs, leaving two round, staring monstrosities in his disintegrating face.

"Ash, stop!"

"I don't want to." He spoke happily, and his face was tinted a flushed pink. He moved a step closer to Pup, pushing at him with the toe of one shoe, which only made Pup scream louder. "You do see the point I'm making, don't you? He's dying, and he knows it. The slowness of the act makes him realize it all the more acutely." He leaned down over Pup's face. "You do know you're dying, don't you, `King of the Dead'? What you're experiencing now is that thing you were so in love with. But for you there'll be no more giving of that

kind of love. In fact, you'll be *nothing* in a matter of minutes. You're literally disappearing, cell by cell, before our very, eyes. You know that, don't you?"

Pup's staring, horror-filled eyes gave answer.

"He knows it," Ash continued, addressing Reggie, "and you know it too. That's the point. Death is a horrible thing. You seem to have gotten the strange notion into your head that it doesn't mean anything, and that's completely wrong. What your former friend is going through is death itself, a dissemination, an uncoupling of Pup Malamut from himself. In a few moments there will be no more Pup Malamut. Pup Malamut will be *dead*. In the past there will have been two Pup Malamuts—the one who lived up to the moment of death, and Pup Malamut at the moment of death. The second one is the one I own. I own that moment. That's what all the poor fools you saw risen from their Montvale graves were, merely the good citizens of Montvale at the moment of their deaths. *I own that moment.* The rest of them, the good citizens who lived, no longer exist. They are gone. And I suppose that's a shame, eh?"

He looked over at Pup now, a nearly skeletal figure trembling as ever more flesh flaked away from his body. "A shame, eh, Pup? No more living Pup Malamut. Not ever. He's made his rounds, and now he's out of the picture. Just like your parents, Pup. They're no more either. No more Mr. and Mrs. Malamut, ever. Did you think of that while you murdered them? Did you think about poor little Lavinia Crawford while you strangled her, how her little pink breasts will never blossom under your fingers, or anyone else's, ever again? There was only one girl in all of time with her breasts, and she's gone. You killed her. No one ever again or before with exactly her body, her eyes, her lips, her sly, stupid smile. Did you think about any of that, Pup? Say yes and I might save you yet."

Pup's ruined, disappearing face nodded wildly. "Sorry, Pup. It's too late."

A keening wail escaped the carcass on the floor of the tent. Ash laughed, the sound building from a croak to a dry cough to a full roar. The wailing sound continued incessantly, even over Ash's laughter, and then suddenly Ash turned to Reggie, continuing to laugh but dropping his tone to a lower register.

"Do you want to see the exact moment when Pup Malamut becomes mine? Would that make you happy?" His laughter stopped, and he said harshly, "You think you went through this when that milk truck hit your bicycle, but you didn't. You saw only the very beginning, and I'll make sure your departure is longer and harder than this foolish boy's ever could be. You're a special case for me, and I'm going to enjoy you." He moved closer to Reggie, grabbing him by the

hair and dragging him over to Pup's body. Holding him by the back of the neck, he thrust his face down toward Pup.

"Look closely, boy," he hissed, his sickle mouth close, as wet as a snake's, to Reggie's ear. "More than this will be yours."

Pup Malamut, the skin all but shorn from his face, bare patches of smooth white skull showing beneath his flesh, thrust himself up horribly on his elbows and tried to reach out at Reggie. "I . . . don't want . . . to . . . die," he gasped. His eyes were huge in their white sockets, his raw hands, as the body fell back, reaching convulsively for Reggie. "Don't . . . let . . . me . . . die . . . please."

Reggie tried to turn away, but Ash's grip held him firmly. He closed his eyes, and then Pup's hands, finding hidden, desperate strength, were upon him, pulling him down.

"Please. . .

Reggie opened his eyes to see Pup's ruined and torn visage mere inches from his own face: it pulsated with escaping warmth, and Pup clasped Reggie tight about the neck.

"God, please!" Pup said, and then his tongue lashed out of his mouth and his teeth bared and he tried to bite Reggie.

Reggie threw himself away from Ash's reaching grasp and fell off to one side. Pup began to scream again.

Laughing, Ash said, "Don't let anyone tell you I don't have compassion," and then Reggie heard a horrified, screeching wail, and when he looked at Pup, there was only a mass of white and red bits.

"There," Ash said, his face flushed dark, the word coming out of him like a tiny gasp. He stood regarding the remains of what had been Pup Malamut, staring at them as if remembering warmly what had just occurred, and then he finally spoke to Reggie.

"I hope you enjoyed what you saw."

Reggie looked at him in simple awe, as though he had just discovered Ash's secret. "You own only one moment," he said.

Ash regarded him mildly. His skin had resumed its normal pasty color. His pitted eyes gave away the interest with which he was following Reggie's words.

"That's all you are," Reggie went on. "You're only that one brief second when life leaves the body, nothing more." His words were a revelation to himself. "That's the only power you have."

Still maintaining his placid demeanor, Ash's voice betrayed the anger he held. "Is that what you think?" He took time to draw one of his cigarettes out and light it. "Have you thought about what it would be like without Reggie Carson? What will happen when you are no more?" His voice was rising in angry degrees. "Have you thought about what it will be like for Reggie Carson when he falls over that ledge, when that *one tiny moment comes?*"

Darkness assaulted Reggie. And coldness. He was in his own body, and he saw the world begin to fall away. He saw the tunnel, up there above him, but he had fallen away from that too. He must have fallen into a hole. It was cold and damp. And then he felt moist earth around him, smelled putrefaction, felt tiny things crawling over him and into him, and when he moved his hands over his body, he felt his body give way, cold parts of his flesh sliding loose from his bones and dropping into his hands, the bones themselves softening, rotting. He was Reggie Carson, and he was decomposing, being eaten away

He was *Reggie Carson*, and he was rotting away!

His mind was in turmoil. Once again he was before Ash, and he wanted to lie in the dust where he was, to curl up like a baby and not move. Ash was right. There was nothing in him that told him Ash was lying. *Reggie Carson would be no more!* No matter what the warming eyes had said to him, no matter how they had filled him with courage and the will to do what he had to do, he knew now that this was the truth—he, Reggie, would be dead.

Ash was laughing. Whatever caution and doubt he had possessed about Reggie was gone. "I knew there was nothing special here," he taunted. "I don't know why I ever thought there was. Do you know," he continued, his tone growing malicious and proud, "that you *bothered* me? I've been among the slime on this earth long before your conception was even a dream. I've been here since the first stupid, crawling, filth-ridden human crawled on all fours to hit his brother with a rock from behind. When the first cells divided after being struck by lightning, I was there, watching while one of them broke and died, turning back into dead water. And I laughed. I've always been here, waiting to drink and feed from this empty, senseless thing you call life. I've enjoyed every minute of it." He spoke with disgust. "And to think that you bothered me."

He turned away, and then Reggie heard his name called, but not by Ash. He looked up sleepily from the dust, pushed himself onto his hands and knees.

He saw Ash grinning at him. Then from behind Ash he heard the voice, a pleading "Reggie . . ." that was weak and hopeful and full of despair. He stood up shakily, brushing the dust from his body. Rips in the tent canvas showed the bright world outside.

Ash stepped aside. Crazy Frances was standing there, and behind her there was another person whom Reggie could not make out. He felt very tired. He heard his name called again, and then Crazy Frances stepped to one side, revealing that the other figure was his mother.

She was kneeling, and Crazy Frances rested her hand on her shoulder. His mother looked confused and tired. She stared at Reggie

as if she didn't believe he was really there.

"Reggie?"

"I'm all right, Mom."

She tried to rise but could not; either Frances' hand was holding her down or she didn't have the strength to get up. Ash again lit one of his black cigarettes.

"As you can see, that nasty business with the horses on the carousel hasn't happened," he commented.

"Don't hurt her," Reggie said.

"Can I do otherwise? Do I want to do otherwise?" Ash took a long pull on his cigarette and then quickly tossed it aside; it smoked lazily, giving off black puffs from the floor.

"Frances," he said softly, cajolingly. Frances stepped forward, taking her hand from Reggie's mother's shoulder.

"Frances," Ash said, "kill the woman."

Frances turned to Reggie's mother, and Ash began to laugh, low and building.

Frances, a voice called from above, and Frances looked up. Reggie saw that the eyes were there, as huge as dishes, as if they contained the whole world.

Frances, the eyes said gently, *He who sent me is the resurrection and the life: if you believe in Him, though you were dead yet shall you live. And whosoever believeth in Him shall never die.*

"He who saves," Frances sobbed, though no tears formed in her eyes. "The North Star. Ash lied to me." She was telling this to herself, and a great cry broke from her.

He who saves was your veil, the voice said, and He is with you now. Ash owns you no longer. Go, and mix your dust with the sands of the earth.

Frances' cry of despair changed to another kind of cry, and a great weight was drawn from her mind, a leaded veil lifted. She held her hands out, and then her body turned instantly to dust that was borne away on soft, scattering winds.

I told you I was with you, the eyes said to Reggie.

A door opened in Reggie's mind, flooding him with light, and he saw what he must do. He knew now that there could never have been any other way. The fear that had possessed him vanished; he wondered why it had ever existed. When he looked up, the eyes were gone because they were within him now, and he heard Ash's scream of rage and saw Ash's face looming over him.

"Kiss me," Reggie said, and he put his mouth on Ash's mouth.

Ash's eyes widened in surprise, and the word "No" tried to make its way to his voice. Reggie held tight. He reached into the shadow man's coat to grasp his body to him, but his hands went into nothingness.

There was a terrible black, cold weight upon him, but Reggie would not let go. Then Ash's mouth began to grow. Reggie felt it moving away from his own mouth on all sides, the thin, burning lips stretching outward. Ash was hissing with rage, and when Reggie opened his eyes, he saw that Ash's face filled his whole vision. The head had pulled back, away from him. It was indistinct, and now, behind it, Reggie could barely make out the sides of the tent and sky beyond. The tent was falling to pieces, and the sky was not red now—it was blue.

Ash opened his mouth to shout something, but only a low, pain-filled hiss escaped. When he grabbed for Reggie, his hands would not reach. They had become the hands they always had been beneath the skin—long, brittle, skeletal bones—and Ash's head was now the hollow, clacking skull bone that had been hidden just beyond sight. The mouth was wide, the eye holes burning with black emptiness. Ash hissed again, a long, sibilant sound, and then everything behind Ash was lost to view and Ash himself was gone in a burn of screaming, sharp light.

A dark, silent envelope enclosed Reggie like a womb; he floated fetus-like in it until it pulled out ahead and behind him, and he was in the tunnel. For a moment he was in darkness, and then suddenly before him, as if the lamp of creation itself had gone on, a bright light arose, and the two eyes were there before him, bathing him in their radiance.

They were his own eyes.

Hello.

The eyes were surrounded by the dim outlines of a body. At a close distance it resembled an animal, a hare or a lamb, but then Reggie saw that it was not an animal at all, but something that looked like a human. Something that looked like himself.

Reggie drew closer, and he saw that the figure's tiny, almost formless arms were spread wide, as if to embrace him.

"I died the day that truck hit me," Reggie said.

Yes, the figure, himself, said. But you were sent back. Every man is really three men: the man during life, the man at the moment of death, and the man after death. Ash owned man at the moment of death. But even that, which he was able to take advantage of in the weak, was only an illusion because there is only one spirit. You. Me. Look.

Reggie looked and saw that a part of himself was not with him anymore. There was a slight, sweet tug, and he saw the body that had been Reggie Carson falling down and away from him, to rest in some other place. He no longer felt that he was of that body, and at the same time, he felt as if he had lost nothing of himself.

That is what he owned; that was his domain. Though it will mean

nothing to you now, I will tell you that your town of Montvale has been restored and that your mother is safe. The others, Jeff Scott among them, now rest. A tone close to amusement came into the soft voice. They will put our both, the man who we were, in the tomb you always visited, the Tomb of the Unknown Man.

"Who sent me back?" Reggie asked.

His own altered self smiled. *That is what you will see.*

The form held out its arms and drew Reggie to itself. He folded gently into it; the form's arms held him like a mother might hold a baby. Reggie closed his eyes and found that he did not want to open them. There was no reason to. He had new eyes now.

He gently wrapped his arms around himself, and rocked himself. And then he slept until it was time for him to open his eyes once more.